

The Travel Books of
GRAHAM GREENE

Journey without Maps
The Lawless Roads



MERCURY BOOKS

No. 45

**BOOKS BY
GRAHAM GREENE**

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Journey Without Maps



PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

SIX years after this book was written I found myself living in Sierra Leone—a writer should be careful where he goes for pleasure in peacetime, for in wartime he is only too likely to return there to work. It was odd flying up from Lagos, following from the sky the line of surf along the Liberian coast, seeing the huddle of tiny shacks which called itself Grand Bassa, where I had dismissed my carriers, passing over the small white isolated building which was the British Consulate at Monrovia. It was odd too retracing my steps from Freetown to Kailahun, travelling in the same tiny lamp-lit train, staying in the same rest-houses.

I can look back now with a certain regret at the hard words I used about Freetown, for Freetown is now one of the homes I have lived and worked in through all the seasons. I have been able to recognise in myself after a year's sojourn the inertia which as a tourist I condemned so harshly in other people. But if there are fallacies into which the passing visitor falls, there are fallacies too which come from a close acquaintance. After a little while there is so much one ceases to notice, and if I were writing of Freetown

now, how unnaturally rosy would my picture be, for I begin to remember mainly the sunsets when all the laterite paths turned suddenly for a few minutes the colour of a rose, the old slavers' fort with the cannon lying in the grass, the abandoned railway track with the chickens pecking in and out of the little empty rotting station, the taste of the first pink gin at six o'clock. I have begun to forget what the visitor noticed so clearly—the squalor and the unhappiness and the involuntary injustices of tired men. But as that picture is true too, I let it stand.

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'O do you imagine,' said fearer to farer,
'That dusk will delay on your path to the pass,
Your diligent looking discover the lacking
Your footsteps feel from granite to grass?'

—*W. H. Auden*

The life of an individual is in many respects like a child's dissected map. If I could live a hundred years, keeping my intelligence to the last, I feel as if I could put the pieces together until they made a properly connected whole. As it is, I, like all others, find a certain number of connected fragments, and a larger number of disjointed pieces, which I might in time place in their natural connection. Many of these pieces seem fragmentary, but would in time show themselves as essential parts of the whole. What strikes me very forcibly is the arbitrary and as it were accidental way in which the lines of junction appear to run irregularly among the fragments. With every decade I find some new pieces coming into place. Blanks which have been left in former years find their complement among the undistributed fragments. If I could look back on the whole, as we look at the child's map when it is put together, I feel that I should have my whole life intelligently laid out before me. . . .

—*Oliver Wendell Holmes*

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

THE WAY TO AFRICA

Harvest Festival

THE tall black door in the narrow city street remained closed. I rang and knocked and rang again. I could not hear the bell ringing; to ring it again and again was simply an act of faith or despair, and later sitting before a hut in French Guinea, where I never meant to find myself, I remembered this first going astray, the buses passing at the corner and the pale autumn sun.

An errand boy came to my help, asking me whether I wanted the Consul, and when I said yes, that was what I wanted, the boy led me straight to the entrance of St. Dunstan's Church and up the steps and into the vestry. It wasn't the sort of beginning I'd expected when I was accumulating the tent I never used, the hypodermic syringe I left behind, the automatic pistol which remained hidden underneath boots and shoes and bags of silver in the money-box. They were preparing for the harvest festival; the vestry was crowded with large dressy yellow blooms and litters of vegetable marrow; I couldn't see the Consul anywhere. The errand boy peered among the flowers in the dim light and at last pointed to a little intent woman bent above the blooms. "There she is," he said, "that's her. She'll tell you."

I felt very self-conscious, picking my way among

the vegetables in St. Dunstan's, asking: "Could you by any chance tell me? Is the Liberian Consul——?" But she knew and I left that street for another.

It was three o'clock and lunch at the Consulate was just over. Three men, I could not distinguish their nationality, overcrowded the tiny room which was deeply buried in the huge new glittering office block. The window-sill was lined with old telephone directories, school textbooks of chemistry. One man was washing up lunch into a basin stuck in the top of a waste-paper basket. Unidentifiable yellow threads like bast floated in the greasy water. The man poured a kettle of boiling water from a gas jet over a plate which he held above the basket; then he wiped the plate with a cloth. The table was littered with bursting parcels of what looked like stones, and the lift porter kept on putting his head in at the door and flinging down more parcels on the floor. The room was like a shabby caravan held up for a moment in a smart bright street. One doubted whether, returning in a few hours' time to the gleaming mechanised block, one would still find it there; it would almost certainly have moved on.

But everyone was very kind. It all came down to a question of paying money; no one asked me why I wanted to go, although I had been told by many authorities on Africa that the Republic of Liberia resented intruders. In the Consulate they had little guttural family jokes among themselves. "Before the war," a large man said, "you didn't need passports. Such a fuss. Only to the Argentine," and he looked across at the man who was making out my papers. "If you wanted to get to the Argentine you even had

to give your finger-prints a month ahead, so that Scotland Yard and Buenos Aires could get together. All the scoundrels in the world went to the Argentine."

I examined the usual blank map upon the wall, a few towns along the coast, a few villages along the border. "Have you been to Liberia?" I asked.

"No, no," the large man said. "We let them come to us."

The other man stuck a round red seal on my passport; it bore the National Mark, a three-masted ship, a palm tree, a dove flying overhead, and the legend "The love of liberty brought us here". Above the same red seal I had to sign the "Declaration of an Alien about to depart for the Republic of Liberia."

I have informed myself of the provisions under the Immigration Law, and am convinced that I am eligible for admission into the Republic thereunder.

I realise that if I am one of a class prohibited by law from admission, I will be deported or detained in confinement.

I solemnly swear that the above statements are true to the best of my knowledge and that I fully intend when in the Republic to obey and support the laws and constituted authorities thereof.

The only thing which I knew of the law was that it forbade a white man to enter the country except through the recognised ports unless he had paid a large sum for an explorer's licence. I intended to enter the country from the British border and make

my way through the forest of the interior to the coast. I am a Catholic with an intellectual if not an emotional belief in Catholic dogma; I find that intellectually I can accept the fact that to miss a Mass on Sunday is to be guilty of mortal sin. And yet 'I solemnly swear' . . . these contradictions in human psychology I find of peculiar interest.

Blue Book

I had read in a British Government Blue Book that May :

The rat population may fairly be described as swarming, the wooden and corrugated iron houses lend themselves to rat harbourage. . . .

The absence of any attempt by the Government, not only to take effective steps to control yellow fever or plague, but even to arrange for the notification of yellow fever, as well as the complete lack of medical supervision of ships touching the Liberian coast. . . .

The great majority of all mosquitoes caught in Monrovia are of a species known to carry yellow fever. . . .

Altogether forty-one villages have been burnt and sixty-nine men, forty-five women and twenty-seven children, making a total of one hundred and forty-one, killed . . .

A case was also reported to me from several sources of a man who had been wounded close to Sasstown and wished to surrender. Although unarmed and pleading for mercy he was shot down

in cold blood by soldiers in the presence of Captain Cole.

The soldiers crept into the banana plantations, which surround all native villages, and poured volleys into the huts. One woman who had that day been delivered of twins was shot in her bed, and the infants perished in the flames when the village was fired by the troops. . . .

In one village the charred remains of six children were found after the departure of the troops

In this connection it may be mentioned that a man who had been a political prisoner at New Sassetown stated that he had heard soldiers boasting of having cut children down with cutlasses and thrown them into burning huts

And when I learnt that Colonel Davis had fought with Tiempoh, who are my children and make farm for me, and had caught Payetaye men and women and ill-treated them, I and all my people were afraid. . . .

As far as is known, the principal diseases in the interior include elephantiasis, leprosy, yaws, malaria, hookworm, schistosomiasis, dysentery, smallpox and nutritional conditions. In the whole country there are only: two doctors in Monrovia, both foreign and both engaged in private practice, a medical officer on the Firestone Plantations, and three or four missionary doctors working in the interior. . . .

In Monrovia itself malaria is practically universal. . . .

In other places the producer sets the prices for

his goods, but in this country the buyer enforces the price to suit his convenience. . . .

The Government can kill all the people of Sassetown and all the tribes of the Kru Coast before we surrender to the Government. We will not return to the coast or surrender until we hear from the British Consul in Monrovia that there will be no more war. Then we will return to Old Sassetown. . . .

There was something satisfyingly complete about this picture. It really seemed as though you couldn't go deeper than that; the agony was piled on in the British Government Blue Book with a real effect of grandeur; the little injustices of Kenya became shoddy and suburban beside it.

And it was saved from melodrama by its irony, by the fact that the Republic was founded as an example to all Africa of a Christian and self-governing state. An American philanthropic society at the beginning of the nineteenth century (many of its directors, it is said, were slave-owners who found it convenient thus to get rid of their illegitimate children) began to ship released slaves to the Grain Coast of Africa. Land was bought from the native rulers and a settlement established at Monrovia. "The love of liberty brought us here," but one can hardly blame these first half-caste settlers when they found that love of their own liberty was not consistent with the liberty of the native tribes. The history of the Republic was very little different from the history of neighbouring white colonies: it included the same broken contracts, the same resort to arms, the same

gradual encroachment, even the same heroism among the early settlers, the peculiarly Protestant characteristic of combining martyrdom with absurdity. There were, for example, the black Quakers from Pennsylvania, teetotallers and pacifists, who when they were attacked by Spanish slavers depended on prayer and were massacred. Only a hundred and twenty escaped and settled in Grand Bassa.

From the first these American half-caste slaves were idealists in the American manner. Their Declaration of Independence, when the Republic was declared, had the glossy white marble effect of the American. The year was 1847, but the phrases were eighteenth century; they belonged to Washington; they had the rhetoric of an expensive tomb. The inalienable rights of life and liberty gravely led off the scroll; but then one passed to "the right to acquire, possess, enjoy, and defend property". To-day the 'ideals' are still American, something a little like the American of Tammany Hall; the descendants of the slaves have taken to politics with the enthusiasm of practised crap players.

"If you desire the prosperity of your people, the independence of your Government, a place of honour for the Lone Star among the flags of all nations, you will support the re-election of President Barclay in this campaign. . . ."

This too attracted me. There seemed to be a seediness about the place you couldn't get to the same extent elsewhere, and seediness has a very deep appeal: even the seediness of civilisation, of the skysigns in Leicester Square, the 'tarts' in Bond Street, the smell of cooking greens off Tottenham Court

clay squatting in a hole, the wooden-toothed devil swaying his raffia skirts between the huts seem like the images in a dream to stand for something of importance to myself.

To-day our world seems peculiarly susceptible to brutality. There is a touch of nostalgia in the pleasure we take in gangster novels, in characters who have so agreeably simplified their emotions that they have begun living again at a level below the cerebral. We, like Wordsworth, are living after a war and a revolution, and these half-castes fighting with bombs between the cliffs of skyscrapers seem more likely than we to be aware of Proteus rising from the sea. It is not, of course, that one wishes to stay for ever at that level, but when one sees to what unhappiness, to what peril of extinction centuries of cerebration have brought us, one sometimes has a curiosity to discover if one can from what we have come, to recall at which point we went astray.

Via Liverpool

But none the less I was a little scared at the prospect of going back by way of Africa alone; I feel very grateful to my cousin, who was willing to accompany me, to share the journey, for which no maps were to be bought, from its start in the restaurant car of the 6.5 from Euston, as we sat before the little pieces of damp white fish. A headline told me that there was another clue in a trunk murder case; a man on the dole had killed himself; while along the line the smaller stations were dashed out like so many torches plunged in water.

The huge Liverpool hotel had been designed without æsthetic taste but with the right ideas about comfort and a genuine idea of magnificence. It could probably house as many passengers as an Atlantic liner; passengers, because no one goes to Liverpool for pleasure, to the little cramped square and the low sky-signs which can almost be touched with the hand, where all the bars and the cinemas close at ten. But there was a character hidden in this hotel; it wasn't chic, it wasn't bright, it wasn't international; there remained somewhere hidden, among its long muffled corridors, beneath the huge cliff-like fall of its walls, the idea of an English inn; one didn't mind asking for muffins or a pint of bitter, while the boats hooted in the Mersey and the luggage littered the hall; there was quite probably a boots. Anyway enough remained for me to understand the surprise of Henry James when he landed in England, "that England should be as English as, for my entertainment, she took the trouble to be."

The natural native seediness had not been lost in the glitter of chromium plate; the muffin had been overwhelmingly, perhaps rather nauseatingly, enlarged. If the hotel were silly, it was only because magnificence is almost always a little silly. The magnificent gesture seldom quite comes off. When on rare occasions beauty and magnificence do coincide, one gets a sense of the theatre or the films, it is "too good to be true". I find myself always torn between two beliefs: the belief that life should be better than it is and the belief that when it appears better it is really worse. But in the huge lounge at Liverpool, like the lounge of a country inn fifty times magnified,

one was at home on the vast expanse of deep dark carpet, only one business man asleep with his mouth open; at home as one would certainly not have been if the Hollywood imagination had run riot. One was protectively coloured, one was seedy too.

Next morning, in the public-house near the Prince's Stage, four middle-aged women sat drinking with an old dirty man of eighty-four. Three had the dustbin look; they carried about them the air of tenements, of lean cats and shared wash-houses; the fourth had risen a little way in the world, she was the old man's daughter over from America for Christmas. "Have another drink, Father?" He was seeing her off. Their relationship was intimate and merry; the whole party had an air of slightly disreputable revelry. To one the party didn't really matter; she had caught the American accent. To the other women, who must return to the dustbin, it was perilous, precarious, breath-taking; they were happy and aghast when the old man drew out a pound note and stood a round himself. "Well, why shouldn't he?" the daughter asked them, asked Jackie boy, the bar-tender, the beer advertisements, the smutty air, the man who came in selling safety-razor blades, half a dozen for threepence, "it's better than spending it on a crowd of strange dames."

The Liverpool waterside at least had not changed since James's day: "The black steamers knocking about in the yellow Mersey, under a sky so low that they seemed to touch it with their funnels, and in the thickest, windiest light";—even the colour was the same, "the grey mildness, shading away into black at every pretext."

The cargo ship lay right outside the Mersey in the Irish Sea; a cold January wind blew across the tender; people sat crammed together below deck saying good-bye, bored, embarrassed and bonhomous, like parents at a railway station the first day of term, while England slipped away from the port-hole, a stone stage, a tarred side, a slap of grey water against the glass.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CARGO SHIP

Madeira

My cousin and I had five fellow-passengers in the cargo ship: two shipping agents, a traveller for an engineering firm, a doctor on his way to the Coast with anti-yellow-fever serum, and a woman joining her husband at Bathurst. All except the woman and the traveller knew the Coast; they knew the same people; they had a common technique of living enforced by common conditions. The daily dose of quinine, mosquito netting over all the port-holes: these to them were as natural as the table-cloth at meals.

It is a condition favourable to the growth of legend. Legend belongs naturally to primitive communities where minds are so little differentiated, by work or play or education, that a story can move quickly from brain to brain uncriticised. But sometimes these conditions arise artificially. A common danger, purpose or way of life can very nearly destroy

differences of intellect and class; then you get the angels of Mons and the miracles at a shrine.

"Yes," they were saying in the smoking-room, "you won't find a tougher man than Captain W." They all knew of him because they all belonged to the Coast: the captain, the doctor, the shipper.

"If he ran into a broken bottle," the doctor said, "his face wouldn't look any different."

"He'd take a tug round the world as soon as look at you."

"He doesn't insure his cargo. He bears the risk himself. That's why his freight-rates are so cheap."

"Will people take the risk?"

"His word's as good as an insurance company's."

"But when he loses a cargo?"

"He hasn't lost one yet."

In the wireless room on a Saturday night the young agent waited hour after hour for the League results. He and the wireless officer shared an esoteric gossip of the sea: how this or that man had quarrelled with the Old Man and joined another line. The bulbs flickered overhead; tubes hummed in the little cabin with its rows of discs and bulbs, as mechanised as was the engine-room below, a great black polished cliff, pipes tied up at the joints in blue, yellow or scarlet bags like hot-water bottles, a solitary negro with a polishing rag in all the glittering desert of brass and iron.

Coming in from the bulbs and gossip and the dusk I overheard the Captain talking to the doctor in the smoking-room. "Four hundred and sixteen people at Dakar," he was saying. The subject came up again at breakfast: plague at Dakar, yellow fever at Bathurst,

outbreaks hushed up on the French coast, never reported on the Liberian: one was seldom allowed to escape the subject of fever. One could begin a conversation with religion, politics, books; it always ended with malaria, plague, yellow fever. As long as one was at sea it was a joke, like somebody else's vicious wife; when one was on land it was like a grim story intended to make the flesh creep, but one became conscious then of people who wouldn't play, who preferred something comforting.

Something like *A Village in a Valley* by Mr. Beverley Nichols, which was in the small library. One reads strange books in a ship, books one would never dream of reading at home: like Lady Eleanor Smith's *Tzigane*, and the novels of Warwick Deeping and W. B. Maxwell: a lot of books, written without truth, without compulsion, one dull word following another, books to read while you wait for the bus, while you strap-hang, in between the Boss's dictations, while you eat your A. B. C. lunch; a whole industry founded on a want of leisure and a want of happiness.

At Madeira it was raining. The touts were out at ten in the morning in the shabby notorious town. One drank sweet wine at the Golden Gates, and the rain dripped off the curious phallic hats hanging outside the shops. The touts wore straw hats with Cambridge ribbons; they kept at one's elbow all the way round Funchal; they weren't a bit discouraged because it was raining, because it was only just after breakfast. "Luxe," they kept on saying, and "Sex" and something about dancing girls. Their industry, like Mr. Beverley Nichols's, was founded on a want

of leisure and a want of happiness. Quick, quick, you are only on shore for half an hour, you are only vigorous for a few more years, have another girl before it's too late, you aren't happy with the one you've got, try another. The women sold violets and lilies and roses in the rain, the phallic hats dripped, the touts couldn't understand that one didn't want a girl just after breakfast on a wet day. There were other ways of filling up time, one could drink sweet wine at the Golden Gates, one could go back on board and read Lady Eleanor Smith or Mr. Beverley Nichols.

A young German artist and his wife came on board at Funchal as deck passengers and were given the little hospital to sleep in. He was a thick spotty man in a velvet jacket; he had known D. H. Lawrence at Taos and Mabel Dodge Luhan. It hadn't made any difference, he wasn't going to write a book about it. In the little hospital he put out his canvases, crude realistic landscapes and the baked faces of Mexican Indians; it grew dark; and everyone drank bad Madeira out of the bottle and he talked about Art and Sport and the Body Beautiful, and his wife, small and curved and lovely and complaisant, was quiet and seasick. He believed in Hitler and Nationalism and swimming and love, he liked the pictures of Orpen and De Laszlo, but Munke's pictures left him dissatisfied. They left out the Soul, he said, they were materialist; not that he disbelieved in the Body, the Body Beautiful and in physical Love. He agreed to come to Africa too, and illustrate this book; an artist was at home anywhere—but after dinner he changed his mind; and his sweet complaisant nubile

wife said, Yes, she wouldn't mind coming to Africa, and after dinner she changed her mind too. He was a bad artist, but he wasn't a bogus one. He lived on almost nothing; he believed in himself and in his hazy Teutonic ideas; and there was a sensual beauty in their relationship. The two lived in a kind of continuous intimacy, she had no ideas but his, no vitality but his; he supplied all the life for both of them and she supplied a warm friendly sensual death; they shared the universe between them. All the time, in the cabin, at dinner, at a café table, they gave the impression of having only just risen from bed.

By dinner-time everyone was drunk on bad Madeira and the pink gin they called Coasters. The shipping agent sang *The Old Homeland* and *The Floral Dance* and *I shot an Arrow into the Air* and the fat traveller called Younger said, "Pass me some more eau de cow," spilling his coffee. The aliens went to their cabin, picking their way across the lower deck and up the iron stairs into the stern; she was seasick, but it only made her quieter; it didn't alter her beautiful sensuous receptivity. The agent sang *The Old Homeland* again—"Far across the sea, I wonder will they pray for me"—and everyone felt English and exiled and wistful, everyone except Younger, who climbed carefully up the stairs, clinging to the banister: "I'm going home by rail." He was more English than any of them; the north country was in his heart; he was firmly local and unsentimental and bawdy and honest. He drank because he needed a holiday, because he had heavy work before him on the Coast, because he loved his wife and had desperate anxieties. He had more cause

to drink than anyone. The boom years were in his heavy flesh and his three chins; one couldn't at first sight tell how the depression lay like lead in his stomach. If one were to paint his portrait in the old style of tiny landscapes and Tuscan towns, one would have given him as background an abandoned blast-furnace or the girders of a great bridge left a perch for birds.

Even when drunk, even when bawdy, he had an admirable sanity. "Eighteen months on the Coast. Tell me, doctor, what do people do about it?"

"Insoluble," the doctor said.

"But what they do about it?"

"Even the Governor has asked me that. There's no answer."

He was the last to go to bed, he would reel for ten minutes up and down the corridor, there was something common and royal about him which called for devotion, nothing he did could offend. "Kipper," he would shout outside the Captain's door, "Kipper," and obediently the Captain would emerge. He had the way of Falstaff with a woman, an absurd innocence that was quite content with a slap and a tickle. "You saucy little sausage," and even the young shy inhibited married woman who had never left Liverpool, who wouldn't drink and wouldn't smoke and wouldn't look at the moon, slapped him back. There was a ballad quality about his bawdry. His words had the merit of children's art; they were vivid, unself-conscious, uncorrupted.

Ballyhoo

The cinema in Teneriffe was showing a film which had been adapted from one of my own novels. It had been an instructive and rather painful experience to see it shown. The direction was incompetent, the photography undistinguished, the story sentimental. If there was any truth in the original it had been carefully altered, if anything was left unchanged it was because it was untrue. By what was unchanged I could judge and condemn my own novel: I could see clearly what was cheap and banal enough to fit the cheap banal film.

There remained a connection between it and me. One had never taken the book seriously; it had been written hurriedly because of the desperate need one had for the money. But even into a book of that kind had gone a certain amount of experience, nine months of one's life, it was tied up in the mind with a particular countryside, particular anxieties; one couldn't disconnect oneself entirely, and it was curious, rather pleasing, to find it there in the hot bright flowery town. There are places where one is ready to welcome any kind of acquaintance with memories in common: he may be cheap but he knew Annette; he may be dishonest but he once lodged with George; even if the acquaintance is very dim indeed and takes a lot of recognising.

Two Youthful Hearts in the Grip of Intrigue. Fleeing from Life. Cheated? Crashing Across Europe. Wheels of Fate.

Never before had I seen American ballyhoo at work on something I intimately knew. It was magnificent

in its disregard of the article for which it had paid. Its psychological insight was either cynically wrong or devastatingly right.

The real Orient Express runs across Europe from Belgium to Constantinople. Therefore, you will go wrong if you interpret the word 'Orient' to indicate something of a Chinese or Japanese nature. There is enough material of other kinds to arrange a lively colourful ballyhoo, as you will see as soon as you turn to the exploitation pages in this press book.

Date Tie-Up. In the exhibitors' set of stills available at the exchange are three stills which show Norman Foster explaining the sex life of a date to Heather Angel, passing dates to Heather Angel and Heather Angel buying dates from the car window. The dialogue is quite enlightening on the date subject at one point in the picture. Every city has high-class food shops which feature fancy packages of dates. Tie-in with one of these for window displays, and for a lobby display, using adequate copy and the three stills.

Another angle would be to have a demonstration of date products, the many uses of dates, etc. This would be quite possible in the much larger cities. And in cases where working with large concerns, patrons may be permitted to taste samples. These tie-ups must be worked out locally despite the fact that we are contacting importers of important brands.

Don't under-estimate the value of a real smart window fixed up with date products, baskets of delicious fruits and dates, and the three stills shown here with adequate copy for your picture. "Buy a

package of delicious dates, and take 'The Orient Express' for Constantinople, a most thrilling and satisfying evening's entertainment, at the Rialto Theatre."

Do you Know That: Heather Angel's pet kitten Penang had to have its claws clipped because it insisted on sharpening them on the legs of expensive tables;

That the pet economy of Heather Angel is buying washable gloves and laundering them herself;

That Una O'Connor permits only a very few of her intimate friends to call her Tiny?

That blast of ballyhoo had not sold the film; to my relief, because by contract my name had to appear on every poster, it had kept to the smaller shabbier cinemas, until now it was washed up in Teneriffe, in a shaded side street behind an old carved door like a monastery's. This was what made it an agreeable acquaintance; it hadn't the shamelessness of success; it might be vulgar, but it wasn't successfully vulgar. There was something quite un-Hollywood in its failure.

The Canaries were half-way to Africa; the Fox film and the pale cactus spears stuck in the hillside, a Victorian Gothic hotel smothered in bougainvillea, parrots and a monkey on a string, innumerable themes were stated like the false starts and indecisions of a lifetime: the Chinese job from which one had resigned, the appointment in Bangkok never taken up, the newspaper in Nottingham. I can remember now only the gaudy poster, the taste of the sweet yellow wine, flat roofs and flowers and an harbour full of empty bottles, and in the small dark cathedral a

Christmas crib (castles and little villages and women with baskets of carrots, a donkey and a motor-car and a comic man in a top-hat, little caves where hermits or gipsies sat asleep on moss-covered rocks, a man on an old-fashioned bicycle, and somewhere right up in a corner, dwarfed by the world, the flesh—those bright spring carrots, the devil—the man in a top-hat, sat the Mother of God with an old-young child, wrinkled and careworn and cross-eyed, and Herod leant over a wall with his crown tilted).

Las Palmas

Of Las Palmas I can remember little more: a man selling women's pyjamas from a rowing boat after midnight, the women in the '33' with black theatrical eyes and heavy figures. It was half-past one in the morning before we got ashore and found a taxi. Nobody could speak a word of anything but Spanish; the drink was bad and dear, but Younger didn't mind. His inevitable expression, "You saucy little sausage," could be heard through all the rooms, his progress was one long slap and tickle and free drink. The manager followed him round with bills he wouldn't pay and Phil brought up the rear, the young shipping agent who was afraid there would be trouble, who had the unrequited devotion of a page in an Elizabethan play. Every now and again to keep the manager quiet Phil paid a bill and the manager tore it up and dropped it on the floor and wrote another. Then Younger stole the woman belonging to a man with a guitar and the man kissed him and

had a drink; the manager wrote a bill, and Phil plucked at Younger's sleeve and said, "Go steady, old man. Go steady." A madman came up and threatened Younger, but Younger didn't understand, didn't care anyway, didn't even hear perhaps. He sat on a chair playing pat-paw with his stout black bitch; sometimes he made a pass at her mouth, but she avoided that, nudging with her elbow, pushing forward her empty glass while the manager wrote out another bill. Then it began all over again, the refusal to pay, the arguments, Phil's "Go steady, old man, go steady," another drink all round, pat-paw, "You saucy little sausage," another bill. On the way to the waterside he passed out altogether, had to be carried, fourteen stone of him, into the rowing boat in the dark, dragged up the rocking companion, undressed and put to bed. But no one grudged it him, he could do these things, next day he was as well as ever, bathed in a costume which wouldn't meet across him, called "Kipper, Kipper" in the passage, was drunk by lunch-time, explained it was his last drink before the Coast: he was going to work now. No one believed him, but we were wrong.

He had the stamina of a bull; he could stop drinking when he chose. The islands were past, next port of call was on the Coast, he had work to do. Nobody knew how far afield his work was taking him and of its importance; he was fat and boisterous, one couldn't tell from his manner the anxiety of his journey. He was taking a big risk; he had to get orders; and yellow fever was not going to stop him. There was an epidemic at one of the points on his route; he didn't know of it when he came on board;

everyone laughed at him about the fever, and one could tell that he was a little scared; but one could tell too that it was not going to make any difference. He was like an old fighter who is forced back into the ring because he needs the purse; he may be out of condition, may be afraid of getting hurt, but he cannot afford to lose, even if the effort kills him. Younger talked about his wife; he had never before been to a place where he couldn't ring her up at nine o'clock of an evening; he'd always done it when he was in Brussels, in Berlin, in Warsaw.

Graveyard

The day after Las Palmas, passengers in West Coast boats wake to a completely new air. It lasts for a day and a day only. My sheets were damp with a kind of dew; there was a warm wet wind and a haze over the sea. The air smelt as salt and fishy as the air on Brighton front. The sodden damp to a traveller back from the Coast with malarial infection in his blood is said to be very dangerous, and among sailors this part of the Atlantic is known as the Elder Dempster Graveyard. But the tradition is older than the Line. Burton wrote of it in his *Anatomy*: "Such a complaint I read of those islands of Cape Verde, fourteen degrees from the Equator, they do *male audire*; one calls them the unhealthiest clime of the world, for fluxes, fevers, frenzies, calentures, which commonly seize on seafaring men that touch at them, and all by reason of a hot distemperature of the air. The hardiest men are offended with the heat, and stiffest clowns cannot resist it."

It made Younger think of yellow fever at Kano. In the smoking-room that night, the first night of his new sobriety, he said that he thought death was a great adventure. But life, Phil said, was a great adventure too. Science was making great strides these days; you never knew; though of course Wells and Jules Verne had foreseen it all; what wonderful prophets they were. He said, "I thought Hannen Swaffer was a prophet too once, but he let me down."

"Isn't Hannen Swaffer a woman?" Younger said.

"No, he's a man."

"Are you sure?" Younger said. But Phil was sure. He'd seen him. He had even spoken to him one night when he came up to address their literary club. It was a change from bridge, that club; they got really famous writers to talk to them. Chesterton had been and Cecil Roberts. Then he went out to look at the moon, leaning over the side, waiting in vain for my cousin or the other woman on board to join him. If one did, he put his arm round her and talked about Wallasey or his wife or League results. He was only formally romantic; he had a great respect for women. He was really far more at home with Younger, looked after Younger when he was drunk, protected him, undressed him if necessary; when Younger became sober he was rather lost, looked at the moon more often, padding round the deck earnestly romantic, irritable because no one would play at tropic nights with him, disappearing at last into the little wireless room to talk about football to 'Sparks'. One night his vitality which had no outlet overcame him and he began to throw glasses overboard.

Dakar

It must have been two days later that I woke to the grating of iron against stone, and there was the Coast. The word was already over-familiar. People said, "Eldridge. Of course, he's an old Coaster," and Eldridge, the middle-aged shipping agent, at the beginning of every meal would say, "Chop, as we call it on the Coast," or handing a plate of onions, "Violets, we say on the Coast." One's pink gin was called a Coaster. There was no other Coast but the West Coast and this was it.

On the quay the Senegalese strolled up and down, long white and blue robes sweeping up the dust blown from the ridge of monkey-nuts twenty-five feet high. The men walked hand-in-hand, laughing sleepily together under the blinding vertical glare. Sometimes they put their arms round each other's necks; they seemed to like to touch each other, as if it made them feel good to know the other man was there. It wasn't love; it didn't mean anything we could understand. Two of them went about all day without loosing hold; they were there when the boat slid in beside the monkey-nuts; they were there in the evening when the loading was finished and the labourers washed their hands and faces in the hot water flowing from the ship's side; they hadn't done a stroke of work themselves, only walked up and down touching hands and laughing at their own jokes; but it wasn't love; it wasn't anything we could understand. They gave to the blinding day, to the first sight of Africa, a sense of warm and sleepy beauty, of enjoyment divorced from activity and the weariness of willing.

*Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté.*

One found it hard to believe at Dakar that Baudelaire had never been to Africa, that the nearest he had come to it was the body of Jeanne Duval, the mulatto 'tart' from Le Théâtre du Panthéon, for Dakar was the Baudelaire of *L'Invitation au Voyage*, when it was not the René Clair of *Le Million*.

It was René Clair in its happy lyrical absurdity; the two stately Mohammedans asleep on the gravel path in the public gardens beside a black iron kettle; the tiny Syrian children going to school in white topees; the men's sewing parties on the pavements; the old pock-marked driver who stopped his horses and disappeared into the bushes to tell his beads; the men laden with sacks moving rhythmically up and down a ladder of sacks, building higher the monkey-nut hill, like the tin toy figures sold in Holborn at Christmas-time; in the lovely features of the women in the market, young and old, lovely less from sexual attractiveness than from a sharp differentiated pictorial quality. In the restaurant, a little drunk on iced Sauterne, one didn't trouble about the Dakar one had heard about, the Dakar of endemic plague and an unwieldy bureaucracy, the most unhealthy town on the Coast. Mr. Gorer in his *Africa Dances* tells how in Dakar the young negroes simply die, not of tuberculosis, plague, yellow fever, but apparently of inanition, of hopelessness. He stayed too long, I suppose, and saw too much; that sudden sense of happiness which came to one in Dakar doesn't last, which came to one in *Le Million*, a

happiness that tingles behind the eyes, beautiful and insecure, a wish fulfilment.

Do not expect again a phoenix hour,
The triple-towered sky, the dove complaining,
Sudden the rain of gold and heart's first ease. . . .

Undoubtedly the other Dakar (the Dakar of the four hundred and sixteen dead, of the despair and injustice) was there, but something else was momentarily shining through, something which was always stubbornly existing. So in an early René Clair film one could believe that this was the life one was born to live, breaking through life as one had been made to live it, breaking through anxiety and irritation and financial depression and a lust which had gone on too long, these voices in the air, this chase of a lottery ticket among the flying opera-hats, this tuneful miniature love behind cardboard scenery: nothing was really serious, nothing lasted, you didn't have to think about to-morrow's food or to-morrow's girl; you stuck up your leg in derision sewing pants on the pavement, you fell asleep among the flowers with your black kettle, you touched hands and felt good and didn't care a damn.

One soon enough discovered, of course, that this impression was not the Coast. The hawks flapping heavily over Bathurst, a long low backcloth of houses and trees along a sandy beach; a swarm of figures in the native quarter like flies on a piece of meat; the not being allowed to land because of yellow fever; the sense of isolation that the woman had as she went off to join her husband in the quarantined town; this

was more really the Coast—the seedy Pole in a singlet and a pair of dirty white trousers who came on board at Konakry, couldn't speak any English or French and wanted to learn the name of the suits in Bridge. The Captain took his gun and shot a hawk which sat in the rigging, the gulls scattered, twisting in the glittering air, and the dusty body plunged through them on to the deck, like a reminder of darkness.

The Shape of Africa

A reminder of darkness: the girl in the Queen's Bar. I met her weeping across Leicester Square when the leaves had dropped and made the pavements slippery; she went into the vestibule of the Empire Cinema and verged violently away again (that wouldn't do), settled at last on a high chair in the Queen's Bar, made up her face, had a gin and tonic; I hadn't the nerve to say anything and find out the details. Besides, it's always happening all the time everywhere. You don't weep unless you've been happy first; tears always mean something enviable.

The aeroplane rocked over Hanover, the last of the storm scattering behind it, dipped suddenly down five hundred feet towards the small air station, and soared again eastwards. Behind the plane the sun set along the clouds; we were above the sunset; looking back it lay below, long pale ridges of stained clouds. The air was grey above the lakes; they were sunk in the ground, like pieces of lead; the lights of villages in between. It was quite dark long before Berlin, and the city came to meet the plane through the darkness as a gorse fire does, links of flame through the

heavy green night. A sky-sign was the size of a postage stamp; one could see the whole plan of the city, like a lit map in the Underground when you press a button to find the route. The great rectangle of the Tempelhof was marked in scarlet and yellow lights; the plane swerved away over the breadth of Berlin, turned back and down; the lights in the cabin went out and one could see the headlamps sweeping the asphalt drive, the sparks streaming out behind the grey Luft Hansa wing, as the wheels touched and rebounded and took the ground and held. That was happiness, the quick impression; but on the ground, among the Swastikas, one saw pain at every yard.

Arrived about nine o'clock at the Gare St. Lazare, Easter, 1924, went to an hotel, then on to the Casino to see Mistinguette, the thin insured distinguished legs, the sharp "catchy" features like the paper faces of the Ugly-Wuglies in *The Enchanted Castle* (" 'Walk on your toes, dear,' the bonneted Ugly-Wugly whispered to the one with the wreath; and even at that thrilling crisis Gerald wondered how she could, since the toes of one foot were but the end of a golf club and of the other the end of a hockey stick"). The next night the Communists met in the slums at the end of a cul-de-sac. They kept on reading out telegrams from the platform and everyone sang the *Internationale*; then they'd speak a little and then another telegram arrived. They were poor and pinched and noisy; one wondered why it was that they had so much good news coming to them which didn't make any difference at all. All the good news and the singing were at the end of an alley in a wide cold hall; they couldn't get out; in the little square

the soldiers stood in tin helmets beside their stacked rifles. That night from the window of an hotel I saw a man and woman copulating; they stood against each other under a street lamp, like two people who are supporting and comforting each other in the pain of some sickness. The next day I read in the paper how the Reds had tried to get out, but the soldiers had stopped them; a few people were hurt, a few went to prison.

The first thing I can remember at all was a dead dog at the bottom of my pram; it had been run over at a country cross-roads, where later I saw a Jack-in-the-Green, and the nurse put it at the bottom of the pram and pushed me home. There was no emotion attached to the sight. It was just a fact. At that period of life one has an admirable objectivity. Another fact was the man who rushed out of a cottage near the canal bridge and into the next house; he had a knife in his hand; people ran after him shouting; he wanted to kill himself.

Like a revelation, when I was fourteen, I realised the pleasure of cruelty; I wasn't interested any longer in walks on commons, in playing cricket on the beach. There was a girl lodging close by I wanted to do things to; I loitered outside the door hoping to see her. I didn't do anything about it, I wasn't old enough, but I was happy; I could think about pain as something desirable and not as something dreaded. It was as if I had discovered that the way to enjoy

- life was to appreciate pain.

I watched from the other end of the bar; she wept and didn't care a damn; she embarrassed everybody; they cleared a space as if a fight was on and she sat

there drinking gin and tonic and crying with empty chairs on either side; the barman kept on serving drinks at the other end. I thought for some reason even then of Africa, not a particular place, but a shape, a strangeness, a wanting to know. The unconscious mind is often sentimental; I have written 'a shape', and the shape, of course, is roughly that of the human heart.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HOME FROM HOME

Freetown

FREETOWN, the capital of Sierra Leone, at first was just an impression of heat and damp; the mist streamed along the lower streets and lay over the roofs like smoke. Nature, conventionally grand, rising in tree-covered hills above the sea and the town, a dull uninteresting green, was powerless to carry off the shabby town. One could see the Anglican cathedral, laterite bricks and tin with a square tower, a Norman church built in the nineteenth century, sticking up out of the early morning fog. There was no doubt at all that one was back in home waters. Among the swarm of Kru boats round the ship the *Princess Marina* with its freshly painted name was prominent. "*Princess Marina*," the half-naked owner kept on calling. "Sweetest boat on the coast."

Tin roofs and peeling posters and broken windows in the public library and wooden stores, Freetown

had a Bret Harte air without the excitement, the saloons, the revolver shots or the horses. There was only one horse in the whole city, and it was pointed out to me by the proprietor of the Grand Hotel, a thin piebald beast pulled down the main street like a mule. There had been other horses from time to time, but they had all died. Where there wasn't a tin shed there were huge hoardings covered with last year's Poppy Day posters (the date was January the fifteenth). On the roofs the vultures sat nuzzling under their wings with horrible tiny undeveloped heads; they squatted in the gardens like turkeys; I could count seven out of my bedroom window. When they moved from one perch to another they gave no sensation of anything so aerial as flight; they seemed to hop across the street, borne up just high enough by the flap-flap of their dusty wings.

This was an English capital city; England had planted this town, the tin shacks and the Remembrance Day posters, and had then withdrawn up the hillside to smart bungalows, with wide windows and electric fans and perfect service. Every call one paid on a white man cost ten shillings in taxi fares, for the railway to Hill Station no longer ran. They had planted their seedy civilisation and then escaped from it as far as they could. Everything ugly in Freetown was European: the stores, the churches, the Government offices, the two hotels; if there was anything beautiful in the place it was native: the little stalls of the fruit-sellers which went up after dark at the street corners, lit by candles; the native women rolling home magnificently from church on a Sunday morning, the cheap European cottons, the deep coral

or green flounces, the wide straw hats, dignified by the native bearing, the lovely roll of the thighs, the swing of the great shoulders. They were dressed for a garden party and they carried off cheap bright grandeur in the small back-yards among the vultures as nature couldn't carry off Freetown.

The men were less assured; they had been educated to understand how they had been swindled, how they had been given the worst of two worlds, and they had enough power to express themselves in a soured officious way; they had died, in so far as they had once been men, inside their European clothes. They didn't complain, they hinted; they didn't fight for what they wanted, they sourly prevaricated. "From what I garnered here and there," suggested the Creole gossip-writer in the Sierra Leone *Daily Mail*, "it is not the intention of the Governor and his wife to make Governor's Lodge, Hill Station, the official residence of the representative of His Majesty the King; those who maintain the view that the environments at Hill Station may influence them to the prejudice of the interest of the people are quite mistaken. In fact, it is considered improbable to entertain such an opinion, and I believe His Excellency will burst into peals of laughter if he were to hear such a thing. I leave it at that."

That was the nearest they could get to a Petition of Right. They wore uniforms, occupied official positions, went to parties at Government House, had the vote, but they knew all the time they were funny (oh, those peals of laughter!), funny to the heartless prefect eye of the white man. If they had been slaves they would have had more dignity; there is no shame

is being ruled by a stranger, but these men had been given their tin shacks, their cathedral, their votes and city councils, their shadow of self-government; they were expected to play the part like white men and the more they copied white men, the more funny it was to the prefects. They were withered by laughter; the more desperately they tried to regain their dignity the funnier they became.

Fashionable Wedding at St. George's Cathedral

St. George's Cathedral was the scene of the first fashionable wedding to take place there this year, on Wednesday, the 11th instant.

The contracting parties were Miss Agatha Fidelia Araromi Shorunkeh-Sawyerr, fourth daughter of the late Mr. J. C. Shorunkeh-Sawyerr, Barrister-at-law, and Mrs Frances M. Shorunkeh-Sawyerr of "Bells Ebuts", King Tom's Peninsula, and Mr. John Buxton Ogunyorbun Logan of the Survey Dept., son of Mr. S. D. Logan, Retired Civil Service Officer.

The bride entered the church at 1.15 p.m. leaning on the arm of her only brother, Mr. J. C. I. Shorunkeh-Sawyerr, who subsequently gave her away.

She wore a frock of white lace lined with white satin, and of full length. Its full court train was of white lace lined with rose-pink satin and it fell from the shoulders. She had on a short veil held in place on her head by a coronet of orange blossoms. She carried a bouquet of natural flowers.

She was followed by five bridesmaids, the Misses Molaké Shorunkeh-Sawyerr (bride's sister) and

Annie Macaulay, being the chief. They wore salmon-pink lace frocks with georgette coatees of the same colour with white straw hats with pink bands. The others were the Misses Fitzjohn, Olivette Stuart, and Eileen Williams. These wore pink georgette frocks and pink hats. The hymn *Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost*, was sung as the bridal procession moved slowly up the nave. The full choir of the cathedral, of which the bridegroom's father is the Dux, was present, and Mr. A. H. Stuart, F.G.C.O., the organist, presided at his organ.

Immediately after the ceremony, the guests repaired to the Crown Bottling Restaurant for Cake and Wine. This function was presided over by Mr. A. E. Tuboku-Metzger, M.A., J.P., an old friend of the bride's late father.

Here six toasts were proposed and responded to. After this the company broke up, some going to the bridegroom's parents in Waterloo Street, and others to the bride's at King Tom's for more solid refreshments.

About 6 P.M. Mr. and Mrs. John B. Logan left for their honeymoon somewhere on the Wilkinson Road.

Before leaving them there, we wish them conjugal bliss, and the best of luck.

Sometimes it was almost Firbank, it recalled the Mouth family forcing their way into the highest social circles of the city of Cuna-Cuna, but alas! the smell of the fish laid fourteen deep in the roadway, the flowers withered and everlasting in the small

public gardens, the low church hymns did not belong to Cuna—"Cuna, full of charming roses, full of violet shadows, full of music, full of love, Cuna. . . !" Wilkinson and Waterloo streets and the Crown Bottling Restaurant were a poor exchange for Carmen Street, the Avenue Messalina, the Grand Savannah Hotel.

Freetown's excitements are very English, as Dakar's are very French; the Governor-General's garden party, where white and black, keeping sedulously apart on either side the beds, inspected the vegetables to the sound of a military band: "Look, he's really managed to grow tomatoes. Darling, let's go and see the cabbages. Are those really lettuces?"; the Methodist Synod: "Notices of motions fall thick and fast. We pass over some questions in the agenda meanwhile. We sit intently waiting to hear the Missionary Committee's letter, everyone is attentive, we listen, the air is still, we can hear the dropping of a pin"; literature from the Freetown Ededroko Store which advertised, "*Novels, Works of Hall Caine, Marie Corelli, R. L. Stevenson, Bertha Clay, etc., e.g., by Corelli: Wormwood, Sorrows of Satan, Barabbas, Vendetta, Thelma, Innocent; by Caine, The Deemster, A Son of Hagar, The Woman Thou Gavest Me; by Stevenson: Treasure Island, The Black Arrow; by Clay: A Woman's Temptation, Married for her Beauty, Beyond Pardon.*"

The contributions of Dorothy Violetta Mallatson to the local daily Press vividly summarise the evangelical fun of Freetown: "Looking behind us, Christmas is just round the corner and out of sight. Outspreading away into the distance there is sunshine.

sports, and all the outdoor joys we love so well. For the school girl or boy there are school sports to take away the dullness and flatness of the schoolroom life. Then there is the Prize Distribution and Thanksgiving Service. For older people there is the All-Comers Tennis Competition and there is coming up shortly many dances and concerts. For instance, there is the Danvers Dance on the 8th of February, and the Play and Dance of the Ladies of the National Congress of British West Africa which comes on the 15th proximo."

It would be so much more amusing if it was all untrue, a fictitious skit on English methods of colonisation. But one cannot continue long to find the Creole's painful attempt at playing the white man funny; it is rather like the chimpanzee's tea-party, the joke is all on one side. Sometimes, of course, the buffoonery is conscious, and then the degradation is more complete. A few Creoles make money out of their prefects, by deliberately playing the inferior, the lower boy: R. Lumpkin alias Bungie is the most famous example. He has become a character. Tourists are taken to see his shop. You are advised by every white man you meet, in the long bar at the Grand, in the small bar at the City, on board ship: "You must go to Bungie's." He is the proprietor of the British-African Workmen Store and he styles himself 'Builder for the Dead, Repairer for the Living'. This is one of his advertisements:

Fear God Honour Your King, be just to mankind
—Says Bungie.

Easy System

British-African Workmen Store undertake to supply Coffin with Hearse, Men, Grave, etc., by special arrangements for easy payment by instalment.

Contracts taken up for Carpentry, Masonry, Painting, etc., at moderate charges.

Ready-made Plain and Polished Coffin supplied with Hearse and Uniformed men at any moment. Corpse washed and dressed.

Come! I'll bury the dead by easy system only be true to your sympathetic friend.

That's Bungie.

Do not live like a fool and die like a big fool. Eat and drink good stuff, save small, be praying for a happy death, then a decent funeral. Bungie will do the rest.

I'll bury the Dead.

(Book of Tobias)

I'll bury the dead and feed the living.

THAT'S BUNGIE ALL OVER.

The City Bar

I wanted to do a pub crawl. But one can't crawl very far in Freetown. All one can do is to have a drink at the Grand and then go and have a drink at the City. The City is usually more crowded and noisy

because there's a billiard table; people are rather more dashing, get a little drunk and tell indecent stories; but not if there's a woman present. I had never found myself in a place which was more protective to women; it might have been inhabited by rowing Blues with Buchman consciences and secret troubles. Everyone either had a wife at Hill Station and drank a bit and bought chocolates at the weekend and showed photographs of their children at home:

("I'm afraid I don't care much for children.")

("O, you'd like mine.")

or else they had wives in England, had only two drinks, because they'd promised their wives to be temperate, and played Kuhn-Kan for very small stakes. They played golf and bathed at Lumley Beach. There wasn't a cinema that a white man could go to, and books of course rotted in the damp or developed worms. You developed worms too yourself, after you'd been out a little time; it was inevitable; nobody seemed to mind. Freetown, they told you, was the healthiest place on the Coast. The day I left a young man in the educational department died of yellow fever.

Worms and malaria, even without yellow fever, are enough to cloud life in 'the healthiest place along the Coast'. These men in the City bar, prospectors, shipping agents, merchants, engineers, had to reproduce English conditions if they were to be happy at all. They weren't the real rulers; they were simply out to make money; and there was no hypocrisy in their attitude towards 'the bloody blacks'. The real rulers came out for a few years, had a long leave every eigh-

teen months, gave garden parties, were supposed to be there for the good of the ruled. It was these men who had so much to answer for: the wages, for example, of the platelayers on the little narrow-gauge line which runs up to Pendembu near the French and Liberian borders. These men were paid sixpence a day and had to buy their own food, and yet in the days of the depression they were docked one day's pay a month. This was perhaps the meanest economy among the many mean economies which assisted Sierra Leone through the depression, a depression caused by the fall in price of palm oil and palm kernels, the preference Levers at that time were showing for whale oil. The economies were nearly all at the expense of the coloured man; government staffs were reduced by a clerk here and a messenger there. Until the visit of Lord Plymouth, the Under-Secretary of State, who arrived in Freetown on the day that I did, there had been only one sanitary inspector for the whole colony and protectorate. Badgered by the central authority, constantly moved from a district which he was attempting to clean up, he would apply in vain for assistants. Forced labour is illegal in a British Colony, but the sanitary inspector without a staff had to choose between breaking the law or leaving villages as dirty as he found them.

One could exonerate the men in the bar; they were not guilty of these meannesses; they were only guilty of the shabbiness of Freetown, the tin roofs and the Poppy Day posters. Santayana, with the romanticism of a foreign Anglophil, has written that "what governs the Englishman is his inner atmosphere, the weather in his soul". The inner atmosphere, he ex-

plains, "when compelled to condense into words may precipitate some curt maxim or over-simple theory as a sort of war-cry; but its puerile language does it injustice, because it broods at a much deeper level than language or even thought. It is a mass of dumb instincts and allegiances, the love of a certain quality of life", and in a finely chosen if romantic metaphor, he describes how "it fights under its trivial fluttering opinions like a smoking battleship under its flags and signals". So to be fair to these men one must recognise a certain fidelity, a kind of patriotism in the dust and anglicanism and the closing hours; this is their "corner of a foreign field", just as much as the flowers and cafés and the neat tarts of Dakar are the Frenchmen's corner. If you are English, they would argue, you will feel at home here: if you don't like it you are not English. If one must condemn, one should condemn not the outposts but the headquarters of Empire, the country which has given them only this: a feeling for respectability and a sense of fairness withering in the heat.

No Screws Unturned

When I came on shore I was met by an elderly Kru carrying an umbrella. He said reproachfully, "I've been waiting for some hours." He held a cable in his hand from London; it asked him to get in touch with Greene, who was leaving for the Republic. "My name," the Kru said, "is Mr. D.". He knew the Republic well, he could be of use.

An even more august authority was giving me unwanted help. Before I left the boat I had been

handed a letter from His Majesty's Chargé d'Affaires in Monrovia, the capital of the Republic, saying that he had announced my visit to the Secretary of the Interior, and the Secretary had informed all the District Commissioners in the Western Province. "Any courtesies shown these persons by the Commissioners and Chiefs with whom they contact will be very highly appreciated, and it is incumbent that you leave no screws unturned to make their trip a pleasant one." The phrase about the screws had a slightly sinister ring, but this fairylike activity had been no part of my plan. If there was anything to hide in the Republic I wanted to surprise it. Luckily the Secretary of the Interior had suggested a route for me to follow, and it would be quite easy for me to avoid it, to avoid indeed the Western Province, after a few days, altogether.

It would have been easier if I had been able to obtain maps. But the Republic is almost entirely covered by forest, and has never been properly mapped, mapped that is to say even to the rough extent of the French colonies which lie on two sides of it. I could find only two large-scale maps for sale. One, issued by the British General Staff, quite openly confesses ignorance; there is a large white space covering the greater part of the Republic, with a few dotted lines indicating the conjectured course of rivers (incorrectly, I usually found) and a fringe of names along the boundary. These names have been curiously chosen: most of them are quite unknown to anyone in the Republic; they must have belonged to obscure villages now abandoned. The other map is issued by the United States War Depart-

ment. There is a dashing quality about it; it shows a vigorous imagination. Where the English map is content to leave a blank space, the American in large letters fills it with the word 'Cannibals'. It has no use for dotted lines and confessions of ignorance; it is so inaccurate that it would be useless, perhaps even dangerous, to follow it, though there is something Elizabethan in its imagination. 'Dense Forest'; 'Cannibals'; rivers which don't exist, at any rate anywhere near where they are put; one expects to find Eldorado, two-headed men and fabulous beasts represented in little pictures in the Gola Forest.

But this was where Mr. D., the elderly Kruman, could help; he knew the Republic.

Mr. D. lived in Krutown. Krutown is one of the few parts of Freetown with any beauty; the Krus, the great sailors of the coast, whose boast it is that they have never been slaves and have never dealt in slaves, have escaped Anglicanisation. The native huts still stand among the palm trees on the way to Lumley Beach, the women sitting outside with their long hanging breasts uncovered. Mr. D.'s house was in the only Europeanised street. A bare wooden stair led into a room with wooden walls on which were hung a few religious pictures in Oxford frames. There were four rickety chairs and an occasional table with a potted plant on it. Crudely painted Mothers of God bore the agony of seven swords with indifference, Christ just above his head exposed a heart the colour of raw liver. Insects hopped about on the wooden floor and Mr. D. gently instructed me how to reach the frontier. A little way over the border there was an American mission, the Order of the Holy Cross at

Bolahun; it would be as well to stay there a few days and try to get carriers to go through with me to Monrovia. He examined the route suggested by the Secretary of the Interior; that had got to be avoided as far as possible; though I should have to follow it to Zigita. On the blank spaces of the English map, Mr. D. made his pencilled suggestions; he couldn't be really sure to a matter of ten miles where to put the places he mentioned; the English map confused him with its inaccuracies. At last he gave it up altogether, and I simply wrote the names down in my notebook, spelling them as best I might: Mosambolahun, Gondolahun, Jenne, Lombola, Gbey-anlahun, Goryendi, Bellivela, Banya. But it is unnecessary to give them all here, for as it turned out I did not follow this route at all, didn't even aim at Monrovia, which had been my object when I sailed. Circumstances in a country where the only way to travel is to know the next town or village ahead and repeat it as you go, like the Syrian woman in *Little Arthur's History* who said "Gilbert, London" across England, were to alter my plans again and again until my small book was filled with lists of probably misspelt names in smudged pencil of places I never succeeded in finding. Examining it now I discover this cryptic entry: "Steamer calling C. Palmas and Sinoe. Keep S. dark. Get off at S. Take the beach to Setta Kru, Nana Kru. At N.K., Dr. V., Am. missionary. To Wesserpor or Dio. Tell people to take me to •Nimley. On to New Sasstown and C.P."

This is the record of another plan which came to nothing through lack of money and exhaustion. I had brought with me from England a letter of intro-

duction to Paramount Chief Nimley of the Sasstown Tribe of Kru, the leader of the rebellion on the coast in 1932. It was in the fight against Nimley that the Frontier Force under the command of Colonel Elwood Davis, the President's special agent, a North American black, had, according to the British Consul's report, killed women and children, destroyed villages, tortured prisoners. Peace had been patched up but not with Nimley, who with the remains of his tribe was hidden in the bush vainly hoping for white intervention. No white man, Mr. D. said, would be allowed to travel to the Kru coast, but it would be possible by booking a passage on a coasting steamer from Monrovia to Cape Palmas to change one's mind on board and land unexpectedly at Sinoe. From Sinoe one would travel along the beach to Nana Kru, and from there it would be necessary to get guides who knew the way to Nimley's hiding-place.

I only mention these plans which came to nothing, these routes which were not followed, because they may give some idea of the vagueness of my ideas when I landed at Freetown. I had never been out of Europe before; I was a complete amateur at travel in Africa. I intended to walk across the Republic, but I had no idea of what route to follow or the conditions we would meet. Looking at the unreliable map I had thought vaguely that we would go up to the Sierra Leone railway terminus at Pendembu, then go across the frontier the nearest way and strike diagonally down to the capital. There seemed to be a lot of rivers to cross, but I supposed there would be bridges of some kind; there was the forest, of course, but that was everywhere. One apparently reliable book I had

read on Sierra Leone mentioned a number of prospectors who had crossed the border into what was supposed to be an uninhabited part of the forest looking for gold and had never returned; but that was a little lower down (the Republic was on the bulge of Africa's coast-line, and I could never properly remember the points of the compass).

Mr. D. discouraged me. It wasn't possible, he said, that way. It was evident that he was particularly anxious for me to travel down by Bellivela. Bellivela was the headquarters of the Frontier Force and was being used as a concentration camp for political prisoners, those who had given evidence before the League of Nations Commission of Inquiry into slavery in the Republic. "They'll have to invite you inside the camp for the night," Mr. D. said, "and then you can poke around and see things."

That night I dreamed of Mr. D. and the Customs at the border, a muddled irritating dream. I was always forgetting something; I had arrived at the Customs with all my bags and boxes and Mr. D. tied up in a bale, but I'd forgotten to get any carriers and I had no boys. I was afraid all the time that the Customs inspector would discover Mr. D., that I would be fined for smuggling, and have to pay a heavy duty.

The Three Companions

- I arrived in Freetown on a Saturday and the train for Pendembu left on the following Wednesday; I had hoped to find servants engaged for me when I arrived, but Jimmie Daker, to whom I had an introduction

who had promised months before to do his best, had forgotten all about it. He was vague, charming, lost, and a little drunk. He sat in the Grand bar drinking whisky and bitters and talking about the Nazis and the war; he began as a pacifist but after his third drink he was ready to serve again at any moment; his face was scarred from the last war. He hadn't any idea of how to get boys for the journey, though he agreed that it wouldn't be wise to take any of those who stood all day at the entrance to the hotel offering their services. He didn't know anybody who knew anything at all about the Republic. No one in Sierra Leone had ever crossed the border.

"Oh, Jimmie," they all said in Freetown, "poor dear Jimmie," when I said that Jimmie was finding me boys. "Jimmie doesn't know a thing."

In the end I got the best boys in Freetown. My head boy, Amedoo, was famous all the way up the line, and Amedoo chose the second boy, Laminah, and the old Mohammedan cook, Souri. And Jimmie Daker was, in a way, responsible. If I had not been to Jimmie's for a sun-downer, I wouldn't have met Daddy, who had been twenty-five years in Freetown and knew every native in the place. He was quite drunk. He drove rapidly up and down the hills choosing the worst roads, he nearly got arrested for taking off a black policeman's hat, the atmosphere was rather like Boat Race night in Piccadilly. "Everyone knows Daddy," he said, trying to drive into Government House at two in the morning (but the gates were closed), reversing rapidly to the edge of a ditch, plunging uphill again while the sentries stood at attention and watched the car disappear with impassive faces,

roaring past the barracks (the guardroom emptied at sight of a car on to the grass and everyone stood to attention in the green under-water light), up a muddy track off the road, coming to a halt against a bank. "You poor innocents," he said. We were stranded like criminals in a small lit cage above Freetown. "Have you ever been in Africa before? Have you ever been on trek? What on earth made you choose to go There?" 'There,' it appeared, was quite unspeakable, though, of course, he knew it only from hearsay; *he* would never dream. . . . Had we any idea of what we were up against? Had we any reliable maps? No, I said. There weren't any to be got. Had we any boys? No. Had we let the D.C.s up the line know of our coming and engaged rest-houses? No, I hadn't known it was necessary. When we crossed the border, how were we going to sleep? In native huts.

"You poor innocents," he said. He nearly wept over the wheel. Had we ever considered what a native hut meant? The rats, the lice, the bugs. What would happen if we got malaria, dysentery? "Something's got to be done," he said, reversing, driving rapidly backwards downhill. His mind switched over to the alternate theme: "Everyone here knows Daddy." He stopped the car in Krutown beside a policeman and thrust his head out of the window. "Who am I?" The policeman approached nervously and shook his head. "No. Come here. Come close. Tell me; who am I?" The policeman shook his head and tried to smile; he was scared; he supposed it was a game, but he didn't know how to play. "Who am I, you black varmint?" A young girl tried to slip through the zone of headlight back into the dark: she had no

business out at that hour; but Daddy saw her. "Hi," he said, sticking his head out from the other side of the car, "come here." She came up to the car; she was far too pretty to be scared; her bare breasts were small and firm and pointed; she had the neat rounded thighs of a cat. "Tell him," Daddy said, "who am I?" She grinned at him. She wasn't scared by any game a man could play. "You know who I am?" Daddy said. She leant right into the car and grinned and nodded. "Daddy," she said. He slapped her face in a friendly way and drove off. He seemed to think he'd proved something. "Have you thought of the leeches?" he said. "They'll drop on you from the trees." We stopped outside our hotel; the wooden floors, the stairs, were alive with ants. Daddy said, "I've got to do something for you, I can't just let you go like this," drooping over the wheel with sleep.

At dawn a madman began to go groaning down the street; I had heard him at intervals all day; I slipped out from under my mosquito net to watch him trail his rags through the grey early morning; he moved his head from side to side, groaning inhumanly like a man without a tongue. There were no vultures to be seen so early, the tin roofs were bare; do vultures nest? and the bats had gone, the fruit bats which streamed out across the town at seven o'clock.

Strange to say, Daddy remembered next morning that he had promised something. He turned up early at the hotel and said he had the boys outside waiting. I didn't know what to say to them; they stared back at me from the bottom of the hotel steps waiting for orders: Amedoo, grey-faced and expressionless,

holding his fez to his chest, a man of about thirty-five; Sourì, the cook, a very old toothless man, in a long white robe; Laminah, the second boy, very young, in shorts and a little white jacket like those barbers wear, with a knitted woollen cap on his head crowned by a scarlet bobble. It was several days before I learnt their names, and I could never fully understand what they said to me. I told them to come back next day, but they haunted the hotel from that moment, the two older men appearing suddenly in the passage, standing silently in front of me with lowered head and fez pressed to the chests. I never knew what they wanted; they always waited for me to speak. It was only later that I realised Amedoo was as shy as myself. I couldn't have imagined then the affection I would come to feel for them.

Our relationship was to be almost as intimate as a love-affair; they were to suffer from the same worn nerves; to be irritated by the same delays; but our life together, because it had been more perfectly rounded, seemed afterwards less real. For there is so much left over after a love-affair; letters and mutual friends, a cigarette case, a piece of jewellery, a few gramophone records, all the usual places one has seen each other in. But I had nothing left but a few photographs to show that I had ever known these three men; I would never again see the towns we had passed through together and never run into them in familiar places.*

* Six years later when the fortune of war brought me back to Freetown, I met Laminah and asked after Amedoo. He broke into peals of laughter, "Old cook," he said, "he all right, but Amedoo he under ground." (1946).

Up to Railhead

Everything was strange from the moment we pressed our way into Water Street Station through the crowd which always watched the twice-weekly train depart, and waved good-bye to Younger, beyond the black barrier of faces. I felt more at one then with the Kuhn-Kan players; I could appreciate the need in a strange place of some point of support, of one or two things scattered round which are familiar and understandable even if they are only Sydney Horler's novels, a gin and tonic. For even the railway journey was strange. It is a small-gauge line, and the train noses its way up-country with incredible slowness (it took two days to go two hundred and fifty miles). There are three first-class compartments. The experienced traveller (there was one on the train) engages the middle compartment, which is quite empty, and puts up his own deck-chair; in the other two compartments the company provides wicker arm-chairs.

One was 'off', and one was horribly afraid of doing the wrong thing; the etiquette of travel in wild places is as exacting as the etiquette of a new club. Nobody in England had warned me of the centre compartment, although I now understood that as a white man I should have made some effort to engage it. I began to fear, too, my first meeting with a chief; I had been told that I would be 'dashed', probably a chicken or some eggs or rice, and I would have to 'dash' back money in return; I must shake hands and be friendly but aloof (it was a relief to enter the Republic and no longer feel that I was a member of the ruling race).

This question of dashes was a complicated one; in the course of the journey we found ourselves dashed not merely the usual chicken (value 6*d.* or 9*d.* according to quality; return dash, which should always slightly exceed the true value, 1*s.* or 1*s.* 3*d.*), eggs (return dash 1*d.* each), oranges and bananas (value about forty for 3*d.*; return dash 6*d.*), but a goat, a dancing monkey, a bundle of knives, a leather pouch, and innumerable gourds of palm wine. It was not always easy to calculate the value, and it was a long time before I overcame my reluctance to press a shilling into a chief's hand.

I had been told by Mr. D. that I might meet three chiefs before we left Sierra Leone, Chief Coomba and Chief Fomba at Pendembu, the end of the line, and Chief Momno Kpanyan at Kailahun, our last stopping place before the frontier. Chief Momno Kpanyan was a very rich man, and the thought of having to dash him a few shillings clouded the whole of the journey.

I had never been so hot and so damp; if we pulled down the blinds in the small dusty compartment we shut out all the air; if we raised them, the sun scorched the wicker, the wooden floor, drenched hands and knees in sweat. Outside, the dusty Sierra Leone countryside unrolled, like a piece of drab cloth along a draper's counter, grey and dull-green and burnt up by the dry season which was now approaching its end. The train rattled and reeled forward at fifteen miles an hour, burrowing intimately through the native villages almost within hand's reach of the huts, the babies rolling in the dust, the men lounging in torn hammocks hung under the

thatch. The bush was as ragged and uninteresting as a back garden which has been allowed to run wild and in which the aspidistras from the parlour have seeded and flourished among the brown-scorched grasses and the tall wrinkled greenery.

All the way along the line the price of oranges went down, from six a penny at Freetown to fifteen a penny the other side of Bo. The train stopped at every station, and the women pressed up along the line, their great black nipples like the centre point of a target. I was not yet tired of the sight of naked bodies (later I began to feel as if I had lived for years with nothing but cows), or else these women were prettier and more finely-built than most of those I saw in the Republic. It was curious how quickly one abandoned the white standard. These long breasts falling in flat bronze folds soon seemed more beautiful than the small rounded immature European breasts. The children took their milk standing; they ran to the breast in pairs like lambs, pulling at the teats. But though the region of modesty had shrunk, it was still there. The train crossed the Mano river; far down below the bridge, a hundred yards away, natives were bathing; they covered their private parts with their hands as the train went by.

The railway journey began before eight and finished some time after five; the first stage of the journey ended at Bo; here the train and passengers stayed the night. At some point during the day one had emerged from the Colony into the Protectorate. The change was more than a matter of geography or administration, it was a change of manner. The Englishmen here didn't talk about the 'bloody blacks'

nor did they patronise or laugh at them; they had to deal with the real native and not the Creole, and the real native was someone to love and admire. One didn't have to condescend; one knew more about some things, but they knew more about others. And on the whole the things they knew were more important. One couldn't make lightning like they could, one's gun was only an improvement on their poisoned spear, and unless one was a doctor one had less chance of curing a snake-bite than they. The Englishmen here were of a finer, subtler type than on the Coast; they were patriots in the sense that they cared for something in their country other than its externals; they couldn't build their English corner with a few tin roofs and peeling posters and drinks at the bar.

It might be thought that these men were more fortunate, that their 'corner', just because it was less material, demanded less effort to construct. But one cannot carry a country's art in one's head, and in the climate of West Africa books rot, pianos go out of tune, and even a gramophone record buckles.

Beside the line Sergeant Penny Carlyle, D.C.'s messenger, swagger-stick under arm, waited for us. Bare-legged and bare-footed, with a cap like a Victorian messenger boy's perched on one side, a row of medals on his tunic, he had the smartness and efficiency of an N.C.O. in the Guards. He marshalled his carriers, led the way to the rest-house, squashed a beetle under his toes, clicked his bare heels and dismissed. There were egrets everywhere, like thin snow-white ducks with yellow beaks. They provided, in their slender Oriental beauty, the final contrast to

Freetown; there wasn't a vulture to be seen, and suddenly, inexplicably, I felt happy in the rest-house, the square squat bungalow built on cement piles to keep out the white ants, as the hurricane lamps were lit and the remains of the tough, dry, tasteless coast chicken were laid out. There was a cockroach larger than a black-beetle in the bathroom, there were no mosquito rods with the camp beds, my medical outfit, which had cost me four pounds ten at Burroughs Wellcome, had been left behind, a native stood outside the rest-house all the evening complaining of something with folded hands; but I was happy; it was as if I had left something I distrusted behind.

On the lawn outside the headmaster's house, beside a tree covered with wax blossoms like magnolia, we sat and drank gin and lime-juice; it was warm and quiet; they talked of the Republic. I carried an introduction to C., a young Dutchman who was said to be somewhere in the Republic looking for diamonds. The traffic superintendent had heard of him; C. had slipped over the frontier somewhere near Pendembu and rumours had come back that he had found the stones. He was alone, working for some small Dutch company outside the great Trust. But the Trust, so the story went, had been frightened by the rumours; if diamonds were mined on a large scale in the Republic, the Trust could no longer control the price. They had sent spies over to trace C., slipped them across from Sierra Leone, from French Guinea and from the Ivory Coast; they had to discover the truth; the price of diamonds and their own existence depended on it. It was a good story to hear there in the dark, near the borders of a country of which no

one in Sierra Leone had been able to tell me anything. It was a good story because it didn't go too far and tell too much, because it had not merely a plot but a subject; it cast a light in so many directions, the satiric, the social, the psychological; one only had to wait for one's own experience to add colour and facts, though I was almost afraid to find C., lest the vivid outline should be marred by detail.

It was useless in Sierra Leone to ask for information about the Republic. No one had been across; any traffic there was came from the other side. President King, who had been forced to resign soon afterwards by the disclosures of the League of Nations Commission of Inquiry, had visited Sierra Leone a few years back. He was received with royal honours; there were banquets and receptions, guns were fired the royal number of rounds. What the President never knew was that he had been used as a dummy for the Prince of Wales, who visited the colony soon afterwards; the salutes had been rehearsed, the committees had tried out their arrangements on him. Later he came up to Bo on his way home. He had planned to go back by land from the boundary, escorted by his troops; it wasn't safe for a President to make his way through the tribes he ruled without two hundred soldiers to guard him. There was a dinner in his honour; it went well to the end; there were the usual toasts; but when the President rose there was an interruption. The Colonel Commandant of the Republic's Frontier Force was having a good time. "Sit down, Mr. President," he said. "I want some more brandies and sodas."

A few days later his host got tired of the President and had him escorted with proper ceremony to the border, but at the wrong place. The Frontier Force had marched to meet him at Foya and here he was at Kabawana. The Presidential party sat on the ground and waited and hoped; they were very frightened; the British platoon marched off and left them there.

Border Town

As it turned out I had no cause to fear a meeting with the diamond prospector. The story was left vague, unverified, suggestive. Six months in the Republic had been too much for C.'s health; he had gone home. This I learnt the next afternoon at Pendembu, at the small German store where I had been told to inquire for him. The train left Bo soon after nine and arrived in the late afternoon. All my food was still in bond, but I bought tinned food at the P.Z. store in Bo. One could buy everything there, drinks and tinned foods and clothes and ironware and cures for gonorrhœa (P.Z. have branches all down the coast, even in the Republic; they are a Manchester firm, a kind of West African Selfridge, and in towns where there is no accommodation for white men, the P.Z. store can always be depended on for hospitality.)

At Pendembu another Court Messenger was waiting for us, and a lorry to take us to Kailahun, to the Government Rest-house, but I called first at the Deutsche Kamerun Gesellschaft to inquire for C. "You'll find his partner, Mr. Van Gogh," the German

manager said, "somewhere near Bolahun." Mr. Van Gogh was looking for gold as well as for diamonds. He had been out there for nine months. He would be at Bolahun or somewhere in the forest. They couldn't say more. The Paramount Chief was waiting by the lorry; he was a small man in a robe of native cloth with a cocky little woollen cap; we had nothing to say to each other, we shook hands and smiled, and then the lorry drove away.

The old engine boiled, and the metal of the foot-board burnt through my shoes; the driver was bare-footed. We drove wildly up- and down-hill for an hour on a road like a farm track, but the impression of reckless speed was deceptive, formed by the humps, the reeling landscape, the smell of petrol and the heat; the lorry couldn't have gone more than twenty miles an hour. Cars are still rare in that corner of Sierra Leone, men scrambled up the banks, women fled into the bush or crouched against the bank with their faces hidden, as civilisation went terrifyingly by them in a fume of evil smoke.

In Kailahun at the time when we arrived there were only two white men, the District Commissioner and a Scottish engineer who was building a bridge, but a third man, a stranger, drifted in during the evening in a singlet and dirty ducks, with a little black beard and shaven monkish head. The Commissioner had arrived by the same train; he had been down the line to Segbwana to investigate a Gorilla Society murder. A child had been carried off and killed, and a woman had sworn she had seen the gorilla and that he wore trousers. A man confessed, but none of the Commissioners believed that he was

the real murderer. He had in his possession a gorilla knife with curved prongs to make the rough clawing wounds, and possession of the knife was alone sufficient to earn him fourteen years' imprisonment. The Commissioner was small, dark, lively, subtle and sensitive; he was new to the place; something had happened to three of his predecessors. There had been a boundary dispute in the district for years between two chiefs, a suspicion of 'medicine' in the food, and in a month's time he would be alone again (the engineer gone). Books came out to him from the Times Book Club, he read them and then they rotted on the shelves.

The engineer sat and smoked in silence. He didn't read books; he had no conversation; he was white-haired, rocky, slow; he might have been sixty and it was a shock to hear that he was in his early forties. He didn't mind the loneliness, he said, he was happier here than in England, it suited him. But he had more nerves than he cared to admit.

"There's a Liberian messenger waiting here for you," the D.C. said. It was what I had feared, that the authorities would send a guide to keep us to the route they had suggested. The D.C. sent a man into the village to find him, and soon afterwards the stranger turned up in his dirty trousers and singlet. Everyone took him to be the Liberian messenger, nobody got up or offered him a drink; he was the Enemy with his shaven head and his curious black tuft of beard. He had nothing to say for himself, standing there patiently while he was told what he had to do. "You are going to show this gentleman the way to Bolahun. He will start the day after to-

morrow. You know the way to the Holy Cross Mission?"

Yes, he said, he had come from there.

It was a long while before anyone thought of asking whether he was the Liberian messenger. He wasn't, the messenger had disappeared from Kailahun, the stranger was a German. He wanted a bed; he had dropped in to Kailahun as casually as if it were a German village where he would be sure to find an inn. He had a bland secretive innocence; he had come from the Republic and he was going back to the Republic; he gave no indication of why he had come or why he was going or what he was doing in Africa at all.

I took him for a prospector, but it turned out later that he was concerned with nothing so material as gold or diamonds. He was just learning. He sat back in his chair, seeming to pay no attention to anyone; when he was asked a question, he gave a tiny laugh (you thought: I have asked something very foolish, very superficial), and gave no answer until later, when you had forgotten the question. He was young in spite of his beard; he had an aristocratic air in spite of his beachcomber's dress, and he was wiser than any of us. He was the only one who knew exactly what it was he wished to learn, who knew the exact extent of his ignorance. He could speak Mende; he was picking up Buzie; and he had a few words of Pelli: it took time. He had only been two years in • West Africa.

I discovered this very gradually; it took longer than the breakfast to which he came next day, more aristocratic than ever in a clean shirt and a pair of

fawn trousers, with an ivory-headed stick, a round white topee, a long cigarette-holder in the corner of his mouth. It was a formal courtesy, but he wasn't interested in anyone; he was only interested in learning what he wanted to know, and he could tell at once that from us he could learn nothing at all. We asked him questions and he retired more than ever into his reserve of secrecy. Had he ever been to Africa before he came out to the Republic two years ago? No, never. Hadn't he found things difficult? No, he said with a tiny smile, it had all been very simple. Would one have trouble with the Customs at the frontier? Well, of course, it was possible; he himself had no trouble, but they knew him. Should one bribe them? That was one of the questions he didn't answer, putting it aside, smiling gently, tipping the ash off his cigarette on to the beaten earth of the floor. The cockchafers buzzed in and out and he sat with lowered head, smoking. No, he wouldn't have another biscuit. Only after a time he exerted himself to give one piece of information; teaching tired him 'as much as learning invigorated him. It would be as well, he said, while we were at the Holy Cross to visit the Liberian Commissioner at Kolahun. The Commissioner was a scoundrel; he could make things very unpleasant; besides, it was necessary to take out a permit of residence before one had been in the Republic a week. Then he walked briskly away, twirling his ivory-headed stick, his topee sloped at a smart angle, looking around, learning things. One day (it took a week to discover so much) he was going to write a thesis for Berlin University (he came from Hamburg, but Dr. Westermann was at Berlin

and he hoped to win the approval of that great African scholar). The thesis was an end, but the collection of material for the thesis had no end. The thesis was as evasive as the Castle in Kafka's religious parable.

We met him again in the long flat village. The chief's new house stood up above the huts, an absurd concrete skyscraper with row on row of stained-glass windows not made to open; in one corner, tucked away, an unpainted door and a flight of splintery steps. This was the house of Momno Kpanyan, one of the richest chiefs in the Protectorate. In the market we got small change; the penny was too large a sum for marketing, and the currency most in use was irons. Their price varied; one could speculate in irons: the rate that day was twenty for fourpence. They were flat strips of iron about fourteen inches long, like blunt arrows; the points must be undamaged and the tails unchipped (this was as good, a way as a milled edge to ensure that the currency was not debased); men were coming in to the market with bundles of several hundred irons on their heads.

Kailahun, in memory, has become a clean village, one of the cleanest we stayed in, but what impressed me at the time was the dirt and disease, the children with protuberant navels relieving themselves in the dust among the goats and chickens, the pock-marked women smeared about the face and legs and breasts with some white ointment they squeezed from a plant in the bush and used for beauty and for medicine. They used it for smallpox, for fever, for toothache, for indigestion; for every ailment under their bleak

sun; when they were young it soothed their headaches; when they were older they smeared it on their big bellies to bring them ease in their confinement; when they were dying it lay like a sediment of salt on their dried-up breasts and in their pitted thighs. Here you could measure what civilisation was worth; looking back later to Kailahun from the villages of the Republic, where civilisation stopped within fifty miles of the coast, I could see no great difference.

"Workers of the World Unite"; I thought of the wide shallow slogans of political parties, as the thin bodies, every rib showing, with dangling swollen elbows or pock-marked skin, went by me to the market; why should we pretend to talk in terms of the world when we mean only Europe or the white races? Neither I.L.P. nor Communist Party urges a strike in England because the platelayers in Sierra Leone are paid sixpence a day without their food. Civilisation here remained exploitation; we had hardly, it seemed to me, improved the natives' lot at all, they were as worn out with fever as before the white man came, we had introduced new diseases and weakened their resistance to the old, they still drank from polluted water and suffered from the same worms, they were still at the mercy of their chiefs, for what could a District Commissioner really know, shifted from district to district, picking up only a few words of the language, dependent on an interpreter? Civilisation so far as Sierra Leone was concerned was the railway to Pendembu, the increased export of palm-nuts; civilisation, too, was Lever Brothers and the price they controlled; civilisation was the long bar in the Grand, the sixpenny wages.

It was not civilisation as we think of it, a civilisation of Suffolk churches and Cotswold manors, of Crome and Vaughan. The District Commissioner's work was to a great extent the protection of the native from the civilisation he represented. The 'noble savage' no longer exists; perhaps he never existed, though in the very young (among the few who are not disfigured by navel hernia) you seem to see behind the present to something lovely, happy and unenslaved, something like the girl who came up the hill that morning, a piece of bright cloth twisted above her hips, the sunlight falling between the palms on her dark hanging breasts, her great silver anklets, the yellow pot she carried on her head.

Freedom to Travel

Kailahun is on the border of French Guinea; that presumably is why the District Commissioner's office was transferred there from Pendembu at the railroad. At Kailahun there is no railway and no telegraph: to communicate with Freetown the Commissioner must send a messenger the eighteen miles to Pendembu. It is difficult to understand what control he has over the border; natives pass freely to and fro; indeed with a little care it would be possible to travel all down West Africa without showing papers from the moment of landing. There is something very attractive in this great patch of 'freedom to travel'; absconding financiers might do worse than take to the African bush. They could be buried there for a lifetime, and they could carry all the money

they needed with them in a country where oranges are fifteen a penny, chickens sixpence each, and wages, if you go deep enough, three shillings a week; where you can feed thirty men, as I found, on thirty shillings a week.

That afternoon we went for a walk into French Guinea with the engineer. The border is the Moa River, about twice the width of the Thames at Westminster. We crossed in a dug-out canoe, standing and balancing with the roll. It was quite easy, only a little frightening because there were alligators in the Moa. The curious thing about these boundaries, a line of river in a waste of bush, no passports, no Customs, no barriers to wandering tribesmen, is that they are as distinct as a European boundary; stepping out of the canoe one was in a different country. Even nature had changed; instead of forest and a rough winding road down which a car could, with some difficulty, go, a narrow path ran straight forward for mile after mile through tall treeless elephant grass. Along the hot wrinkled surface lay the skins of snakes. Natives came stooping up the path, bowed under green hammocks of palm nuts; they looked like grasshoppers in a Silly Symphony. We walked for an hour and a half without coming to a village and at last turned back to Sierra Leone. The engineer said the path went straight down to the coast by Konakry, and again one felt the happy sense of being free; one had only to follow a path far enough and one could cross a continent. Sweating in the hot dry day and growing cool again, one found it hard to believe that this part of Africa should have so unhealthy a reputation; one forgot C.'s sickness and the

diseased villagers. I had not so much as heard a mosquito and the daily five grains of quinine seemed a waste of medicine.

But that was during the day; when it was dark, sitting in the engineer's bare bungalow and drinking warm beer, I wasn't so sure about the place. The man looked sixty; one had to explain somehow the fifteen years of white hair and lines he hadn't really lived. He said again how happy he was; he hadn't been able to settle in England, his wife was nervy, she had never been out with him, West Africa wouldn't suit her, she was afraid of moths, and as he spoke, the moths flocked in through the paneless windows to shrivel against the hurricane lamp, the cockchafers and the beetles detonated against the walls and ceiling and fell on our hair. He didn't mind insects himself, he said, leaping from his chair, hitting at the moths with his hand, squashing the beetles underfoot. (He couldn't keep still for a moment.) The only thing he feared, he said, was elephants. He had been watching a shoot once beside his motor-cycle when an elephant charged him; it was a hundred yards away and he couldn't start his cycle. When it was ten yards away he got his cycle started, and after a quarter of a mile at twenty miles an hour he looked back and saw that the elephant hadn't lost a yard. He got up from his chair again and made for a beetle, but it was too quick for him, driving up against the ceiling. He said he wasn't lonely, he didn't know what nerves were—bringing his hand against the wall—he always believed in having one hobby; the last tour it had been the wireless, another tour butterflies, this tour it was his car.

"Those things are so noisy," he complained. "They keep one awake at night."

"Surely it's only the light that brings them in," I said.

"Oh," he said, "I always leave a light burning at night," and his eyes followed the beetles up and down the bare room. Somebody was playing something; the sound came all the way from the village: a kind of harp playing without melody, an endless repetition of notes.

He said, "I'm sorry you are off to-morrow." He said it so often that one couldn't doubt him, even though in the next breath he would explain that he wasn't lonely, that he liked the life.

I had sent off a messenger that morning with a letter to the Father Superior at the mission at Bolahun. The act of sending a letter by messenger a day's journey ahead into another country was pleasantly mediæval. One paid the messenger nothing when he left; he met one somewhere on the road on his return journey, the road a foot-wide path through thick forest, crossed and recrossed by other paths. But the messengers never went astray; they were as reliable as the English Post Office. Once, when the message was urgent, I sent a man by night, giving him a fill of paraffin for his lamp, and with a dagger hanging over his shoulder he ran out into the dark bush, the letter stuck in a cleft stick.

It was January the twenty-sixth when we left for the Republic (snow in London, yellow fever in Free-town, mist over the burnt grasses at Kailahun). There was a road for another fifteen miles towards the border; I had ordered two lorries to call for myself

and the German, who had brought carriers with him from the Republic, at seven o'clock. It was a twenty-mile march from the end of the road to the mission on the other side of the frontier and I was anxious to be there before dark. Nor had I any idea how long we might be held up at the Customs. Only one lorry turned up and it was an hour and a quarter late. The German doubted whether my cousin and I would reach Bolahun before night, for we had only one hammock and his aristocratic mind recoiled from the idea of walking with the men, from the stumbling and scrambling in the dust, and the tiredness. He himself had a chair slung on poles so that he could sit upright above the carriers. But I had to think of money; one couldn't have less than six carriers for a four-man hammock and by walking from Biedu I was saving seven and sixpence. We packed ourselves on the one small lorry; three whites, three boys, eleven carriers, and thirty loads, and drove unsteadily down the rough road through the thin morning mist. Great flattened thimbles of perpendicular rock rose above the dripping palms; we drove between.

I was vexed by the delay at Kailahun. I had not yet got accustomed to the idea that time, as a measured and recorded period, had been left behind on the coast. In the interior there was no such thing as time; the best watches couldn't stand the climate. Sooner or later they stopped. My own watch and my cousin's were the first to go, and afterwards, one by one, I used up the six cheap watches I had brought with me for 'dashes' from Marks and Spencer's. Only one reached the coast and it had long ceased to record the 'real' time; when it got dark I simply put the

hands at six-thirty. If I wanted to get up earlier in the morning I put the hands on. Perhaps this was what Stanley had in mind when he heard Big Ben strike as he lay dying and exclaimed at the strangeness, "So that is Time!"

But on the lorry from Kailahun I still believed that I could plan my journey by time-table. I thought that we were going to Monrovia, the capital, straight from Bolahun and that we would be there within a fortnight; I would not have admitted the possibility that in four weeks we should be in a place I had never heard of, in the middle of the Republic, watching an old skinny woman who had made lightning in her village carry water back on her head to her fellow-prisoners in the horrible little gaol at Tapee-Ta.

For one thing I hadn't the money for so extended a journey. I had cashed the last of my credit at Freetown and carried with me about twenty-five pounds in shillings, sixpences and threepenny-bits. In a steel moneybox with a padlock it made about half a man's load. It was no good taking anything but silver into the Republic, and I was to find curious objections here and there to the silver money I *had* brought. One tribe wouldn't look at money with Queen Victoria's head on it; the news of her death had penetrated to the most unlikely places, to places where I and my cousin were the first white people to be seen in living memory, and the value of the coins, they believed, had died with her. When we approached the coast, among the Bassa tribe, we found that nobody would accept the ordinary English silver stamped with a crown or acorns; they would only

take the British West African coinage stamped with a palm tree. But this trouble was for the future; I was concerned only at the moment with time, with the need to get to Bolahun before dark. It was an unpractised traveller's anxiety; it led to unnecessary strain and my carriers' mistrust. Later I got used to not caring a damn, just to walking and staying put when I had walked far enough, at some village of which I didn't know the name, to letting myself drift with Africa.

To the Frontier

At Biedu the chief was waiting in the village with the carriers and an interpreter. I knocked the price down from one and sixpence a man to one and three-pence, conscious of the faint cynical amusement of the German, who never paid more than sixpence. The loads were spread out down the centre of the village and for the first time I could see the full extent of the luggage we had brought with us: the six boxes of food, the two beds and chairs and mosquito nets, three suitcases, a tent we were never to use, two boxes of miscellaneous things, a bath, a bundle of blankets, a folding table, a money-box, a hammock; I couldn't help being a little shamed by my servants, who each brought with them a small flat suitcase.

Later I tried to calculate how lightly a man could travel with safety for any length of time in the West African bush. I had spent more than fifty pounds on equipment and my invoices read like the list of goods supplied to an Everest expedition, but I do not think I could have cut down the loads by more than

four with safety, for in West Africa there are strict limits to the lightness of travel, as the story of Dr. D., a German botanist, suggests.

A week after I crossed the frontier Dr. D. died at Ganta in the Central Province, a town which I reached on February the fourteenth. His pathetic and dignified death, which was obviously deliberate, brought the world of Hitler, of Dachau and the concentration camps and Nazi self-righteousness even into this corner of Africa. Dr. D. had had forty years' experience of West Africa. Before the war he was German Consul in Monrovia and an agent for the Woermann Line, but he was already known at Hamburg University as a botanist. After the war he was the first German to reopen business in the Republic, but he failed, he left debts behind him, and the new Hitler's Germany to which he returned was not sympathetic to failure. He was seventy years old and a ruined man, and after forty years on the Coast he cannot have been at home among the swastika banners of Berlin, the Sunday processions with drums and bugles and bayonets under the Brandenburg Gate, the demonstrations at the Tempelhof. He was interested in tropical flowers, he wasn't interested in who fired the Reichstag. Harvard University gave him a little money to return to the Republic and make a collection of botanical specimens in the interior. He found Hitler's Germany well established in Monrovia; the two enthusiastic Nazis there disapproved of Dr. D. Hearing a rumour that he would be staying at the German Legation, they called on the Consul-General to protest, so that in those last days he was forced to find hospitality at an English

store. There is no evidence of Dr. D.'s intention, but it seems obvious that he had no wish to return to Europe and that he preferred to die in Africa. It is the only satisfactory explanation of his recklessness. For he went up from Monrovia through Bassa country to Sanoquelleh, ten days' trek, without a hammock, without provisions, without even a bed or a mosquito net; he can hardly have travelled lighter when his body was brought down from Ganta for burial in the Lutheran Mission at Mühlenburg. He slept on native beds, ate the native food, and died of dysentery.

There are limits, then, to travelling light. A District Commissioner in Sierra Leone seldom travels with less than twenty-five carriers for himself alone, and for much shorter treks than ours proved to be, while at one time, after we had lost two men from sickness, we were travelling with twenty-three. At Biedu, with a four-man hammock for my cousin, I had to take twenty-five carriers. A journey of about twenty miles therefore cost a little more than thirty shillings. Travel in Africa, if carriers have to be hired by the day, is expensive. This was the experience in the Republic of Sir Alfred Sharpe, whose route I followed at the start. He was forced to take carriers from village to village, sometimes paying two sets of carriers in twenty-four hours at the fixed rate of a shilling a day. At most villages there would be delay in finding new carriers; all the men might be working on the farms; and often it was impossible to travel more than eight miles in a day. I learned from his experience and waited at Bolahun a week until I had engaged carriers willing to come with us all the way,

and apart from the saving in wages I was able to average more than twelve miles a day over a period of four weeks.

The chief at Biedu gave me a chicken, I gave the chief a shilling. Souri, the cook, tied the chicken's legs together, Amedoo went down the line of loads testing the weights, the German sat down on his hammock chair, and "Off!" I said. I felt like a subaltern facing my platoon for the first time. I couldn't really believe that when I said "Off!" the twenty-five carriers would be set in motion. I stood back and watched them with an odd feeling of pleasure, an absurd sense of pride, when like a long mechanical toy they were set in motion and wavered and straightened and strode out through the village on to a wide track which narrowed soon into a path through the elephant grass, into a tree-trunk over a stream, which wound into woods and clearings and woods again, and at last after two hours broadened out into a wide plateau which was the frontier; three or four huts, a few riflemen in scarlet fezzes with a gold device, the Liberian flag (a star and stripes), and a little man with a black moustache and a yellow skin and a worn topee who came out into the clearing and greeted me with a shifty nervous jubilant air as much as to say: we've got you here, "leave no screws unturned." plenty of tin for yours truly. He said, oh yes, he was expecting me; he had been warned.

One couldn't help having, however unjustifiably, a sense of the dramatic; the way forward through the clearing was as broad as the primrose way, as open as a trap; the way back was narrow, hidden, difficult, to the English scene.

The Way Back

Rather more than two thousand miles away Major Grant was probably buttonholing another friend. "It's just how you look at it," he would say; "the fellows are always bragging about Paris, but I say England's good enough for me." He used to visit a brothel in Savile Row; there were scenes of luxurious abandonment in close proximity to the select tailors. He would ring up on the phone and make an appointment, "Three this afternoon," then explain rather guardedly what he wanted, guardedly because you never knew when the police might listen-in and to procure a woman was a criminal offence. "Young," he would say, "mind it's young"; "Fair or dark?" the maid would say at the other end and sometimes Major Grant replied "fair" and sometimes "dark", according as his passion urged him at the moment towards his fair or dark angel. Then it was as well to add a few details, "Something rather lean," and in another mood, "Curved but not too curved." He didn't, he told me, find the place very satisfactory; shop-girls and nursery-maids adding a little to their wages on the slant were pitifully lacking in finesse. I think it was the theatre rather than the play which exercised its fascination over Major Grant; he liked the idea of ordering a woman, as one might order a joint of meat, according to size and cut and price. There was a wealth of dissatisfaction in his indulgence; he knew the world, and all the time he took his revenge for the poor opinion he had of it. Presently he shifted his custom to an address in

Hanover Street, and faded out of my knowledge, though occasionally the old voice came to me insinuatingly across the Corner House tables. "Like a pig in a poke. That's what I enjoy. Never know what you are going to get." "And if they were not quite up to mark?" "I take what comes," the voice would say, "I always accept 'em."

"Having to construct something upon which to rejoice."

Miss Kilvane lived in the Cotswolds in a strange high house like a Noah's ark with a monkey-puzzle tree and a step-ladder of terraces. The rooms were all tiny and of the same shape, like the rows of rooms in an advertising exhibition or in the brothel quarter of an eastern city. The rooms were packed with china ornaments, like Staffordshire and Woolworth pieces and Goss presents from Bournemouth. She was a follower of the Regency prophetess, Joanna Southcott, had a manuscript collection of her prophecies, two counterpanes the prophetess had made, seals and locks of hair and a Communion glass engraved with little ludicrous symbolical figures. She was old and innocent and terribly sure of herself; she took down Joanna's life from the ghost's lips. At tea a mouse ran backwards and forwards in a cupboard behind Miss Kilvane's back; I could see it moving through a crack, between the tins of rather dry biscuits. The old lady, with clear pale-blue eyes, wore an old-fashioned dress of faded mauve and horn-rimmed glasses; in the drawing-room there was a portrait of Joanna, china ornaments, antimacassars on horsehair chairs, a wireless set and a *Radio Times*. She spoke with complete confidence of the millennium which would come in

the next fifty years; she described it in mundane detail. "I have always wanted to see Jerusalem." She showed me her volumes of manuscript, prophecies taken down by Joanna's servant, sometimes in doggerel verse. "Impostors can copy the prose," she said, "but not the poetry. People go away and think they can write like that too. Gentlemen send me the strangest sensual verses." She spent a long time looking for someone to publish her life of Joanna. She made her way down Paternoster Row and saw a publisher's office called Sion House; it really looked, she said, as if inspiration had brought her to the right place. She told a man behind a counter that she had brought the manuscript of Joanna's life and he went away and never came back. "It's the worst snub I've ever received," she said, but nothing could deter her. She was so innocent and in a way she was so worldly; she printed the life at her own expense; she founded a press to do it. Maori followers of Joanna sent her a motor-car, but she couldn't learn to drive it; it lay in a garage in the village. A pity; it would have been useful, for since the Lindbergh Baby Case (she kept her old clear horn-rimmed eyes sharply on the world) she had made the discovery that even babies could be "sealed" for Joanna. Her companion was in the north at the time sealing babies. "Isn't it beautiful?" she said, turning over the *Radio Times*. Before I left she sold me a pound of tea "from my plantations"; she meant she had some shares in the company; she thought I would like it; the blend was very soothing. It was hot in the small shut rooms and the mice were restless. I climbed down the terraces to the road, past the monkey-puzzle tree, and she watched me

go, perched up beside the Noah's ark with the lonely convictions she shared with the Maoris. She had been made to pay two hundred pounds for her relics; the printing press had passed out of her hands; but she had an immense conviction of success. "They tell me the movement is making great progress in the Oxford colleges."

Mr. Charles Seitz was the son of a doctor. He was born in Bombay two years before the Mutiny and he died in 1933 frozen to death in a cottage on a bed of straw. He was the kind of figure that attracts legends. Even his real name was lost in common speech, so that he was known among the Campden villagers as Charlie Sykes, as he padded down the High Street bent double under a weight of incredible rags, clutching a tall stick, his bearded Apostle face bent to the pavement, his eyes flickering sideways, aware of everyone who passed. He was suspiciously like a stage madman; he played up to strangers, bellowing and shaking his stick, so that they edged away a little daunted. Sometimes in summer he went berserk in the market-place, shouting and shaking all alone in a desert of indifference; no one took him seriously, least of all himself. He earned money from Americans with kodaks, snapped picturesquely in front of the ancient butter market.

There were two rival stories of how his madness started. One was romantic, an unhappy love-affair. The other was probably the true one, that his brain gave way from overwork for a medical degree. Once an inhabitant of Campden spoke in his hearing of an operation; Charlie Sykes, beating his chest,

described the operation in detail. That was how he would speak, gruffly and disconsolately, beating his chest. He had a grudge against God. "There He is," he said to me, "up there. We think a lot about Him, but He doesn't think about us. He thinks about Himself. But we'll be up there one day and we won't let Him stay."

He had an extraordinary vitality. There was a time when five men could not hold him, and once when two policemen tried to arrest him at Evesham for begging, he flung them both over a hedge. He walked several times a week into Evesham; it was eight miles each way by road, but he didn't go by road. He knew every gap in every hedge for miles around, and once two men camping in a field above Broadway woke up to see his face in the tent-opening. "Naughty," he said and disappeared.

He had banked several hundred pounds which he never touched. The only work he ever did, after his reason went, was cattle-droving. He begged, if that word can be applied to his friendly demands, "Now, what about potatoes? Or a cabbage? Well then, turnips? What have you done with all that dough you had yesterday?" I never saw him in a shop, but on Friday mornings he toured the dustbins in the long High Street, turning over their contents in a critical unembarrassed way like a lady handling silk remnants on a bargain counter.

His cottage in Broad Campden had two rooms with one broken chair and a pile of straw in the corner and sixteen pairs of old shoes. He stopped a sweep in the village once and asked him to clean his

chimney, repeating the one word, "Shilling—shilling." The sweep began to clean, but he couldn't finish, in the airless room and the appalling stench. But the stench didn't keep out the cold of a hard winter, and when a policeman broke in because no smoke had been seen from the chimney, he found Mr. Charles Seitz frozen to death on his straw in the upper room. They didn't care to undress him; he was so verminous that the fleas jumped on them from his wrists; they put round his shoulders the web with which coffins are lowered into the grave, and dragged him head first down the stairs. Then they crammed him quickly into his coffin, rags and all, and nailed him down. It was terrible weather for grave-diggers, the ground hard enough for an electric drill six inches down.

Major Grant said with relish that the shabbiest adventure he had ever had was in a flat off the Strand with two bawds. They wouldn't give him change for his note or give him his note back; it was only a question of ten shillings, but he suddenly grew tired of being cheated; he had made a bargain and he'd stick to it. He sat on the bed and wouldn't leave the flat; they threatened him and badgered him, but he wouldn't move; through a crack in the blind he could see the flame and flicker of the Strand reflected in the windows of a winehouse. They gave in and he went home.

Buckland digging in the garden turned up a she-mandrake. He said that it was good for cows and pigs to keep them in condition; he put some snails on one side to take home for his supper. Buckland was a didicoi: which was the name they gave in Gloucester-

shire to gipsies. He had run away from home when he was a boy and walked for two days without food; then he stole a loaf from a baker's van and ate it behind a hedge. The next day he got a job at a dairy farm. The farmer asked him whether he could milk a cow; he said yes, and the other men milked his cow for him until he'd learnt to do it for himself; and the farmer never knew.

On either side the Ridge Way the fields were being harrowed, the horses disappeared over the swell of the down, the men singing in the pale autumn sunlight. Once when one of them came parallel with the other, he called out: "Old Molly George has a night out to-night." A flock of crows was picking at the turf beside the White Horse. A man was ploughing in a cup of land so far below that he was the size of a grain of oats; the brown-turned earth grew in size, the olive-coloured unturned earth diminished until there was only a thin lozenge in the middle of the field. The crows were flat below, wheeling in mid-air at the height of a cathedral spire. The man sang as he ploughed, his voice as loud as a gramophone in the next room, but I could only catch one word—"angels". When the lozenge disappeared, I could see him lead his horse to the hedge and a thin fume of smoke came up but dispersed long before it reached me. He was burning weeds.

It was winter now, snow in London, the fierce noon sun on the clearing, yellow fever in Freetown, behind on the way to the Coast the mist was rising from the forest, drifting slowly upwards, like the smoke of burning weeds below the Ridge Way. We turned away from Major Grant and Miss Kilvane, from the

peace under the down and the flat off the Strand, from the holy and the depraved individualists to the old, the unfamiliar, the communal life beyond the clearing.

PART II

CHAPTER ONE

WESTERN LIBERIA

The Forest Edge

It was midday. We followed the Customs man into a thatched shelter, sat on high uncomfortable drawing-room chairs and smoked: the little yellow man sat opposite us in a hammock and smoked too, swinging back and forth. I smiled at him and he smiled back; they were surface smiles; there was no friendliness anywhere. The man was thinking how much he could exact, I with how little loss I could escape. A woman brought in a child to see the white people and it screamed and screamed uncontrollably. The men of the Frontier Force lounged and spat in the vertical sunrays, and one could almost see the brown earth cracking. I began a second cigarette.

Then Laminah burst in, a small detonating bomb of fury in the stillness, the doing nothing. He was like a Pekinese who has been insulted by an Alsatian. Somebody had told him he must pay duty on his white barber's jacket which had a rubber lining. The Customs officer surrendered the point with courtesy, but it seemed to be the signal for the fun to start. I produced my invoices, the German opened a small suitcase and paid half a crown; the officer was in a hurry to get on to bigger game, and the German passed out of the frontier station bobbing above the heads of his carriers. The officer settled to work on

the invoices and the soldiers spat and grinned and passed remarks and I wiped off the sweat.

"This will take all day," the Customs man said. "Everything here except the tin of Epsom salts, the quinine and the iodine has got to pay duty." He explained that he would let me go through to Bolahun if I left a deposit; any change would be sent after me; he calculated that four pounds ten would be sufficient guarantee. I extracted a bag of sixpenny-bits from the money-box without disclosing the automatic. But it wasn't quite the end. I had to pay two cents each for the eight forms on which my dutiable goods were to be set down in detail. I had to pay for two Revenue stamps, and I had to sign my name at the bottom of the eight blank sheets saying that the items listed above were correct. I was completely in their power; they could fill up anything they liked on the forms. The alternative was to stay where I was for the night and have all my bags and bales opened.

As it was I didn't escape so easily. The next day he sent a soldier over to Bolahun demanding another six pounds ten, and when the soldier went back empty-handed, he came himself, borne in a hammock the long rough path from Foya with four carriers and a couple of soldiers, a dirty white topee on his head and a ragged cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He swaggered across the verandah, a little sour, mean, avaricious figure, grinning and friendly and furious and determined. He got his money, drank two glasses of whisky, smoked two cigarettes; there was nothing one could do about it; it was impossible to bribe an official who probably took a lion's share anyway of what he exacted.

I enjoyed the first day's trek into the Republic because everything was new: the sense of racing the dark, even the taste of warm boiled water, the smell of the carriers; it wasn't an unpleasant smell, sweet or sour; it was bitter, and reminded me of a breakfast food I had as a child after pleurisy, something vigorous and body-building which I disliked. This bitter taint was mixed with the rich plummy smell of the kola nuts the carriers picked from the ground and chewed, with an occasional flower scent one couldn't trace in the thick untidy greenery. All the smells were drawn out, as the heat increased, like vapour from moist ground. The carriers walked naked except for loin-cloths, the sweat leaving marks like snails on their black polished skins. They didn't look strong, they hadn't the ugly muscular development of a boxer; their legs were as thin as a woman's, but they ended in typical carrier's feet, flat like enormous empty gloves, spreading on the earth pancake-wise as if the weights they carried had pressed them out in a *peine forte et dure*. Even their arms were childishly thin, and when they raised the fifty-pound cases a few inches to ease their skulls, the muscles hardly swelled, were no thicker than whipcord.

We were on the edge of the immense forest which covers the Republic to within a few miles of the coast; we climbed steeply from the frontier post at Foya and from the first village we came to we could see the bush below the huts, falling away, a ragged cascade, towards the sea, lifting and falling and swelling into green plains; hundreds of miles of them, tall palms sticking out above the rest like the brushes of chimney sweeps. The huts here, and in all the

Bande territory, were circular with a pointed thatched roof overhanging the parti-coloured mud walls, white-washed halfway up. There was one door and sometimes a window; in the middle of the floor were the ashes of a fire which would be lit again at sunset from a communal ember and fill the single room with smoke; the fumes kept out mosquitoes, kept out, to some extent, the fleas and bugs and cockroaches, but not the rats. They were all much alike, these villages, built on a hill-top on several levels like medieval towns; the path one had followed through the bush would drop steeply to a stream where the villagers came to wash their clothes and bathe, then rise abruptly up a wide beaten track out of the shade to a silhouette of pointed huts against the midday glare. The ground in the villages was scarred by the dry beds of streams. In the centre was the palaver-house and at the limit of the village the blacksmith's forge, both open huts without walls.

But though nearly all the villages at which I stayed had these common properties—a hill, a stream, palaver-house and forge, the burning ember carried round at dark, the cows and goats standing between the huts, the little grove of banana-trees like clusters of tall green feathers gathering dust—not one was quite the same. However tired I became of the seven-hour trek through the untidy and unbeautiful forest, I never wearied of the villages in which I spent the night: the sense of a small courageous community barely existing above the desert of trees, hemmed in by a sun too fierce to work under and a darkness filled with evil spirits—love was an arm round the neck, a cramped embrace in the smoke, wealth a little

pile of palm-nuts, old age sores and leprosy, religion a few stones in the centre of the village where the dead chiefs lay, a grove of trees where the rice birds, like yellow and green canaries, built their nests, a man in a mask with raffia skirts dancing at burials. This never varied, only their kindness to strangers, the extent of their poverty and the immediacy of their terrors. Their laughter and their happiness seemed the most courageous things in nature. Love, it has been said, was invented in Europe by the troubadours, but it existed here without the trappings of civilisation. They were tender towards their children (I seldom heard a crying child, unless at the sight of a white face, and never saw one beaten), they were tender towards each other in a gentle muffled way; they didn't scream or 'rag'; they never revealed the rasped nerves of the European poor in shrill speech or sudden blows. One was aware the whole time of a standard of courtesy to which it was one's responsibility to conform.

And these were the people one had been told by the twisters, the commercial agents, on the Coast that one couldn't trust. 'A black will always do you down'. It was no good protesting later that one had not come across a single example of dishonesty from the boys, from the carriers, from the natives in the interior: only gentleness, kindness, an honesty which one would not have found, or at least dared to assume was there, in Europe. It astonished me that I was able to travel through an unpoliced country with twenty-five men who knew that my money-box contained what to them was a fortune in silver. We were not in British or French territory now: it wouldn't have

mattered to the black Government on the Coast if we had disappeared and they could have done little about it anyway. We couldn't even count as armed; the automatic was hidden in the money-box, never loaded, never seen; it would have been easy when we were crossing one of the fibre bridges to stage an accident; it would have been easy, less drastically, simply to mislay the money-box or to lose us in the bush.

But "poor fool", one could tell the Coast whites were thinking, "he just didn't know how he was being done". But I wasn't 'done'; there wasn't an instance of even the most petty theft, though in every village the natives swarmed into the hut where all day my things were lying about, soap (to them very precious), razor, brushes. "You can have a boy for ten years," they'd say, "and he'll do you at the end of it," and laying down their empty glasses they'd go out into the glaring street and down to the store to see whom they could 'do' in the proper understood commercial way that morning. "No affection," they'd say, "after fifteen years. Not a scrap of real affection," expecting always to get from these people more than what they had paid for. They had paid for service and they expected love thrown in.

I had hoped to reach the mission at five o'clock; but five o'clock brought us only to another hill, another group of huts and stones, and the forest thick below. The balls of cotton were laid outside the huts to dry and a small tree ruffled a pale pink blossom against the sky. Somebody pointed out the mission, a white building which the low sun picked out of the forest. It was at least two hours away, and the journey be-

came more than ever a race against the dark, which the dark nearly won. It came down on us just as we left the forest and wound through the banana plantation at the foot of Mosambolahun, and it was quite dark and cold as we passed between the huts, the old cook flitting ahead in his long white Mohammedan robe, carrying a trussed chicken. All the fires had been lit in the huts and the smoke blew across the narrow paths stinging the eye; but the little flames were like home; they were the African equivalent of the lights behind red blinds in English villages. There must have been nearly two hundred huts on Mosambolahun, packed together on a thimble of rock, and it stood apart in its remote pagan dirt from the neat Christianised garden village of Bolahun in the cleared plain below. A wide flattened path ran down across the plain to Bolahun and a swaying hammock came up it and a little noisy group of men. The hammock stopped at my side and an old, old man in a robe of native cloth with a long white beard put out a hand. It was the chief of Mosambolahun; ninety years old he quivered and shook and smiled while his people chattered round him. He couldn't speak any English, but a boy with a gun whom I found at my side told me that the chief was on his way home from Tailahun, where a brother chief had died. He was swept away again by his impatient hammock-bearers, waving his dried old hand, smiling gently, curiously, quizzically. He was the explanation, I later learnt, of Mosambolahun's dirt; he was a puppet of the younger men, without authority. He had about two hundred wives, but they would sell him the same wife over and over again; he was too old to keep

count. He knew that he was too old, he wanted to retire for a younger man, but it didn't suit his lawless village to lose their puppet. When he became impotunate they told him they had made him a bishop, and that pleased and quieted him.

It was a two-mile walk up to the mission through the village of Bolahun, through the deep barking of the frogs. The mission belonged to the Order of the Holy Cross, a monastic order of the American Episcopal Church. I dumped my loads outside the long bungalow and waited for the priests to come out from Benediction. I could hear the low murmur of Latin inside; in the darkness only the white eyeballs of my carriers were visible, where they squatted silent on the verandah; everyone was too tired to talk. But the sound of the Latin represented a better civilisation than the tin shacks of the English port, better than anything I had seen in Sierra Leone; and when the priests came out and one led the way to the rest-house, his white robe stirring in the cold hill wind, I was for the first time unashamed by the comparison between white and black. There was something in this corner of a republic said to be a byword for corruption and slavery that at least wasn't commercial. One couldn't put it higher than this: that the little group of priests and nuns had a standard of gentleness and honesty equal to the native standard. Whether what they brought with them in the shape of a crucified God was superior to the local fetish worship had to be the subject of future speculation.

That night, as the filter dripped and dripped in the bare rest-house living-room, after the carriers had

been paid off and the case of whisky opened, I went outside to find the sick C.'s partner, Van Gogh. For the prospector's tent was just outside and a hurricane lamp was burning. "Van Gogh," the priest had said, "you'll like Van Gogh," and seeing a syphon standing on the boxes by the tent, I thought that I would invite him to bring his soda over for a drink. I raised the flap and there Van Gogh was, lying wrapped in blankets on his camp-bed; I thought he was asleep, but when he turned his head I saw that he was sweating; the pale golden stubble of his chin was drenched in sweat. Five hours before he had gone down with fever, and all that night the German doctor attached to the mission sat up with him. He was bad, very bad; he had spent a lifetime in the tropics, but nine months in the Republic had got him down. Next day they took him to the little mission hospital in our hammock; the boys from his gold-camp in the Gola forest came and packed up his tent and goods and carried him down, sick and swaying under the blazing sun.

Sunday in Bolahun

It was Sunday in Bolahun, unmistakably Sunday. A herd drove out his goats among absurdly Biblical rocks, a bell went for early service, and I saw the five nuns going down in single file to the village through the banana plantations in veils and white sun-helmets carrying prayer-books. They were English; tea with them (a large fruit cake and home-made marmalade and chocolate biscuits wilting in the heat and delicious indigestible bread made with palm wine instead

of yeast) was very like tea in an English cathedral town; it was an English corner one could feel some pride in: it was gentle, devout, child-like and unselfish, it didn't even know it was courageous. One couldn't help comparing the manner of these nuns living quite outside the limits of European protection with that of the English in Freetown who had electric light and refrigerators and frequent leave, who despised the natives and pitied themselves.

A great deal of nonsense has been written about missionaries. When they have not been described as the servants of imperialists or commercial exploiters, they have been regarded as sexually abnormal types who are trying to convert a simple happy pagan people to a European religion and stunt them with European repressions. It seems to be forgotten that Christianity is an Eastern religion to which Western pagans have been quite successfully converted. Missionaries are not even given credit for logic, for if one believes in Christianity at all, one must believe in its universal validity. A Christian cannot believe in one God for Europe and another God for Africa: the importance of Semitic religion was that it did not recognise one God for the East and another for the West. The new paganism of the West, which prides itself on being scientific, is often peculiarly neurotic. Only a neurosis explains its sentimental lack of consistency, the acceptance of the historic duty of the Mohammedan to spread his faith by the sword and the failure to accept the duty of a Christian to spread his faith by teaching.

The missions in the interior of the Republic are, of course, peculiar in being completely free from poli-

tical or commercial contacts. The black Government distrusts them and no European firm has any trading posts in the Liberian hinterland. Faith in their religion is the only thing which can have induced American monks and English nuns to settle at Bolahun. There is no drama to compensate them for the fever, the worms and the rats; the only danger is the danger of snake-bite or disease. They are not ascetics, who find satisfaction in cords and hair-shirts; they have done their best, once settled in Bolahun, to make themselves comfortable. The fathers have built a little hospital, they get their chop boxes from Fortnum and Mason, wine comes in over the French border, vegetables once a month from Sierra Leone; they have even built a kind of rough hard court for tennis. They haven't forced Christianity on an unwilling people, they haven't made a happy naked race wear clothes, they haven't stopped the native dances. The native in West Africa will always wear clothes if he has the money to buy them, he will always prefer a robe to a loin-cloth, and to anyone who has spent much time in the bush villages the roughest native robe will appear æsthetically preferable to the human body—the wrinkled dugs, the running sores. As for the dances and the fetish worship, the missionaries have not the power to stop them if they wished to; Christianity here has its back to the wall. Converts are comparatively few; there is no material advantage in being converted; the only advantage is a spiritual one, of being released from a few fears, of being offered an insubstantial hope.

And in Bolahun particularly there were material disadvantages in Christianity. No white man is

allowed to own land in the Republic, the missions are at the mercy of the Government, and nine miles away at Kolahun lived Mr. Reeves, the District Commissioner. Mr. Reeves was a Vai, a Mohammedan; he belonged, psychologically, to the early nineteenth century, to the days of the slave trade. He hated Christians, he hated white men, especially he hated the English language. With his seal-grey skin, dark expressionless eyes, full deep red lips, dressed in a fez and a robe of native cloth, he gave an effect, more Oriental than African, of cruelty and sensuality; he was gross, impassive and corrupt. His wife was a Miss Barclay, a member of the President's household, and it was said among the natives that when he was appointed the President promised him that he would be a District Commissioner for ever. He was sent first to Sanoquelleh at the other end of the country and an unpleasant story had followed him to Kolahun, a story of some Mandingo traders whom he was said to have caught smuggling goods over the border from French territory, and to have shut in a hut and burned to death. It was impossible in the Republic to investigate a tale like that, but there were other stories of cruelty and despotism for which I found plenty of evidence: stories of his house built by forced labour and paid for by the seizure of the natives' produce; stories of how his messengers flogged the men working on the road, how no man from Christianised Bolahun dared show his face in the town. The nuns one day had seen him pass hurriedly by in a hammock, his messengers whipping the carriers on. So many stories leaked down to Monrovia that even a Government separated by ten days'

rough trekking was forced to take notice, and the President was on his way, at this very time, to Kola-hun to listen to the chiefs' complaints.

One had to remember that background to Benediction in the little ugly tin-roofed church. The raised monstrance was not a powerful political symbol: "Come to me all ye who are heavy laden and I will give you commercial privileges and will whisper for you in the ear of a Minister of State." It offered, like early Christianity, stripes from the man in power and one knows not what secret oppression from the priests of the fetish. There were not many at Benediction: Christianity here was still the revolutionary force, appealing to the young rather than the old, and the young were on holiday. A tiny piccaninny wearing nothing but a short transparent shirt scratched and prayed, lifting his shirt above his shoulders to scratch his loins better; a one-armed boy knelt below a hideous varnished picture. (He had fallen from a palm-tree gathering nuts, had broken his arm, and feeling its limp uselessness had taken a knife and cut it off at the elbow.)

A Chief's Funeral

A few days after our arrival Amedoo fell ill. All through the night I heard his racking cough, and in the morning the German doctor examined him and found one lung affected. He lay on the doctor's couch dumb with terror, but he agreed to go into the hospital; he was frightened, but he was still the perfect servant. His illness introduced me to Mark. Mark was a Christian schoolboy; he came down from

the mission to help Laminah and the cook; he was dirty and lazy, but he was amusing. He had a great sense of drama and a high neighing laugh; he soaked up gossip like a sponge, and he had this characteristic in common with white boys of his age, that he was the hero of imaginary adventures.

On the fourth morning early, there was a stir in the village below, a blowing of horns which faded slowly on the northward road. Long before anyone else Mark knew what had happened and he told it with malicious glee because he hated Reeves. Reeves with the chiefs had gone down to the limit of the road to meet the President, but the President had slipped quietly up by other paths to Kolahun and arrived at an empty compound: the horns and the shouts were Reeves's party returning as quickly as they could to Kolahun. So I sent Mark off with a letter to the President asking for an interview, and while I and my cousin sat at supper, Mark dramatically returned, bursting in at the door, holding himself poised at the entrance with his hand raised, before he delivered the reply, stuck in a cleft stick, that the President had already moved on from Kolahun to Voinjema. You could tell that he was dramatising the whole affair, he had persuaded himself that he had escaped by the skin of his teeth from the wicked D.C.

Mark, because he was a Bande and could speak English, acted as my guide round Bolahun. A chief had died at Tailahun two miles away and Mark led us over to the village to see what we could of the funeral ceremonies. It was a tiny place perched on an uneven rock mound. The grave was in the centre of the village among the flat stones which marked

the other graves; a mat was spread on it, and a middle-aged woman sat there, the youngest mother among the chief's wives. She was shielded from the sun by a roof of palm branches, and a pile of fuel and a cooking-pot stood there at the spirit's disposal. Christianity and paganism both marked the dead man's grave, for there was a rough cross stuck on the mound to propitiate the God whom the old chief had accepted on his deathbed, while in a pit close by, following a pagan rite, sat eight wives, naked except for a loin-cloth. Other women were smearing them with clay; it was rubbed even into their hair. The majority were old and hideous anyway, but now the pale colour of the pit in which they sat, they looked as if they had been torn half decomposed from the ground. They had lost with their colour their mark of race and might have been women of any nation who had been buried and dug up again. There was pathos in the bareness of these symbols, the cross, the clay, the youngest mother. One felt that two religions here were appealing on the simplest terms: splendour and the big battalions were on neither side. There must have been scenes very like this, I thought, in the last days of pagan England, when a story about a bird flying through a lighted hall into the dark played its part in the conversion of a king.

It was the third day after the burial. The next day the women would wash off the clay, oil their bodies and be free again, there would be dancing for three days on end, and again at the end of forty days. The girls were getting their hair frizzed out for the funeral dances instead of wearing it in the usual way gummed down in a neat pattern of ridge and parting.

The local "devil", Landow from Mosambolahun had entered the village for the funeral, and it was really to see him dance that I was there. I had caught one glimpse of him at dusk in Bolahun striding by in his long raffia skirts and his wooden snouted mask. From each village on the way he collected irons, for on entering Tailahun he must pay the new chief a tribute of several bundles.

The new chief dozed in his hammock in the tiny palaver-house. I dashed him two shillings; it was the heat of the day, and he was bored and embarrassed by the visit. Two chairs were fetched for us, and about thirty people crowded into the cramped hut; the insects were hopping on the floor. Presently two men with long drums arrived; dangling below each drum a metal disc. They wore red caps with gold stars on them and a long tassel very like the caps of the Frontier Force I had seen at Foya. They stamped their bare feet among the jiggers and tapped their drums and metal discs with little curved hammers. More musicians slowly gathered in the cramped hot hut at the sound of the drums. Three women came with varying sizes of rattles—gourds containing grains of rice which they shook in nets, and a man with a harp of five strings made of palm fibre, attached to half a gourd which he pressed to his breast (the faint sweet twanging could only be heard when the drums and rattles were still). Last came a man with an ordinary big drum, which did give a kind of sexual urgency to a music hard for a European to understand. The music was continually mounting to a climax as the drummers beat their feet and sweated and the women rattled and swayed, but nothing ever

happened. It seemed only one more meaningless climax when the devil at last appeared.

The Liberian 'Devils'

I call him 'devil' because it is the word most commonly used among the whites and English-speaking natives in the Republic. It is no more misleading, I think, than the word 'priest' which is sometimes used elsewhere. A masked devil like Landow (of what are known as the Big Bush Devils I shall have something to say later) might roughly be described as a head-master with rather more supernatural authority than Arnold of Rugby ever claimed. Even in the Sierra Leone Protectorate, where there are many missionary schools, most natives, if they are not Mohammedan, will attend a bush school, of which the masked devil is the unknown head. Even the Christian natives attend; Mark had attended, though the Christians are usually favoured with a shortened course because they cannot be fully trusted with the secrets of a bush school. And the bush schools are very secret. All the way through the great forest of the interior one comes on signs of them; a row of curiously cropped trees before a narrow path disappearing into the thickest bush: a stockade of plaited palms: indications that no stranger may penetrate there. No natives, girls or boys, are considered mature till they have passed through the bush schools, and the course in the old days lasted as long in some tribes as seven years, though now two years is the more usual period. There are no holidays; the children are confined to the bush; if a child dies his belongings are deposited

outside his parents' hut at night as a sign that he is dead, and he is buried in the bush. When the children emerge again they are supposed to be born anew, they are not allowed to recognise their parents and friends in the village until they have been introduced to them again. One definite mark they bear with them from the bush, the mark of 'tattooing'. The tattooing varies with the tribes: in some tribes a woman's body from the neck to the navel is elaborately and beautifully carved. 'Carved' is a better word than 'tattooed' to convey the effect, for tattooing to a European means a coloured pattern pricked on the skin, but the native tattoo marks are ridged patterns cut in the flesh with a knife.

The school and the devil who rules over it are at first a terror to the child. It lies as grimly as a public school in England between childhood and manhood. He has seen the masked devil and has been told of his supernatural power; no human part of the devil is allowed to show, according to Dr. Westermann, because it might be contaminated by the presence of the uninitiated, but it seems likely also because the unveiled power might do harm; for the same reason no one outside the school may see the devil unmasked for fear of blindness or death. Even though the initiates of his particular school, who have seen, as it were, the devil in his off-moments, know him to be, say, the local blacksmith, some supernatural feeling continues to surround him. It is not the mask which is sacred, nor the blacksmith who is sacred; it is the two in conjunction, but a faint aura of the supernatural continues to dwell in either part when they are separate: so the blacksmith will have more power

in his village than the chief, and the mask may continue to be revered, even when discarded, and fed by its owner like a fetish.

Mark, when I knew him better, told me a little of his own experience. As a Christian boy he spent only a fortnight in the bush, and all he did, he said, was to sit and eat rice. He was in the mission school one day when the devil, this same Landow, came for him. There had been no warning. His teacher told him not to be afraid, but the devil, through his interpreter (for the devil does not speak a language the native can understand), said, "I'm going to swallow you." He was not allowed to go home first; he was bound hand and foot and his eyes were bandaged and he was carried into the bush. He was very scared. Then they flung him on the ground and cut him with a razor, but he said it didn't hurt much. They made two little ridges on his neck, two under the armpit, two on the belly. I asked him if he was beaten, for Dr. Westermann, writing of the Pelle tribe in Liberia, has described a kind of Spartan training. He said he was beaten once: one day the devil told the boys they were not to go outside their huts all day whatever they heard; of course they disobeyed and were beaten. At the end of a fortnight he was dressed in white clothes and taken back to the village in the dark. He admitted at last rather reluctantly that the devil, who didn't wear his mask in the school, was the blacksmith at Mosambolahun: so perhaps they were wise to teach him nothing, but just to let him sit and eat rice for a fortnight. In any case they are easy-going, lazy, not very religious in Bande country. It was to be different among the Buzies.

The Masked Blacksmith

It was the blacksmith of Mosambolahun then who now swayed forward between the huts in a head-dress of feathers, a heavy blanket robe, and long raffia mane and raffia skirts. The big drum beat, the heels stamped and the gourds rattled, and the devil sank to the ground, his long faded yellow hair billowing in the dust. His two eyes were two painted rings and he had a flat black wooden snout a yard long fringed with fur; when it opened one saw great red wooden tusks. His black wooden nose stuck up at right angles between his eyes which were almost flat on his snout. His mouth opened and closed like a clapper and he spoke in a low monotonous sing-song. He was like a portmanteau word; an animal, a bird and a man had all run together to form his image. All the women, except the musicians, had gone to their huts and watched Landow from a distance. His interpreter squatted beside him carrying a brush with which, when the devil moved, he kept his skirts carefully smoothed down lest a foot or arm should show.

The devils need an interpreter because they do not speak a language the native can understand. Landow's mutterings were fluent and quite unintelligible. Anthropologists, so far as I can gather, have not made up their minds whether it is a real language the devil speaks or whether the interpreter simply invents a meaning. Mark's explanation has the virtue of simplicity, that the Bande devil speaks Pessi, that the Pessi devil speaks Buzie; the Buzie devil, on the other hand, he continued with a convincing lack of

consistency, spoke Buzie, but in so low a tone that no one could follow him.

The devil was paying his respects to the chief and to the strangers, so the interpreter explained in Bande, and was ready to dance for them. There was an uneasy pause while I wondered with the embarrassment of a man in a strange restaurant whether I had enough in my pocket. But a dash of a shilling was sufficient and the devil danced. It was not so accomplished a dance as we saw later by a devil belonging to a woman's society in Buzie country; the lack of religious enthusiasm in the Bande tribe, if it allows them to lead an easier life, less under the fear of poisoning, diminishes their artistic talent. Vitality was about the only quality one could allow Landow; he lashed a small whip; he twirled like a top; he ran up and down between the huts with long sliding steps, his skirts raising the dust and giving his progress an appearance of immense speed. His interpreter did his best to keep up with him, brushing him when he was within reach. The spirit was definitely carnival; no one above the age of childhood was really scared of Landow; they had all passed through his school, and one suspected that the blacksmith of Mosambolahun, the slack grimy town, had not maintained very carefully his unmasked authority. He was a 'good fellow', one felt, and like so many good fellows he went on much too long: he would sit on the ground and mutter, then run up and down a bit and sit down again. He was a bore as he played on and on in the blistering afternoon sun, hoping for another dash, which I simply hadn't got with me. One woman ran up and flung

down two irons and ran away again, and he cracked his whip and raced and turned and spun. The villagers stood in the background smiling discreetly; it was a carnival, but it wasn't a carnival in the vulgar sense of Nice and the Battle of Flowers; it wasn't secular and skittish; like the dancing in the Spanish cathedral at Easter, it had its religious value.

I remembered a Jack-in-the-Green I had seen when I was four years old, quite covered except for his face in leaves, wearing a kind of diving-suit of leaves and twirling round and round at a country cross-roads, far from any village, with only a little knot of attendants and a few bicyclists to watch him. That as late as the ninth century in England had religious significance, the dance was part of the rites celebrating the death of winter and the return of spring, and here in Liberia again and again one caught hints of what it was we had developed from. It wasn't so alien to us, this masked dance (in England too there was a time when men dressed as animals and danced), any more than the cross and the pagan emblems on the grave were alien. One had the sensation of having come home, for here one was finding associations with a personal and a racial childhood, one was being scared by the same old witches. They brought a screaming child up to the devil and thrust him under the devil's muzzle, under the dusty raffia mane; he stiffened and screamed and tried to escape and the devil mouthed him. The older generation were playing the same old joke they had played for centuries, of frightening the child with what had frightened them. I went away but looking back I saw a young girl dancing before Landow, dancing with the sad

erotic infinite appeal of projecting buttocks and moving belly; she at least didn't know it was the blacksmith of Mosambolahun as she danced like Europa before the bull, and the old black wooden muzzle rested on the earth and the eyes of the blacksmith watched her through the flat painted rims.

Music at Night

That night Gissi, a Buzie man, came up to play the harp. A row of black heads lined the verandah, while he sat with dangling legs picking out of the palm fibres light melancholy monotonous music, beautifully superficial music which just tickled the surface of the mind, didn't tiresomely claim any deep emotion whether of grief or exaltation, the claim which fixes strained masks on the faces in a concert hall. This was the music of a cigarette-box; it was sad, but it didn't really care, everything would always be the same. The little recurring notes plucked with four nails died out and began again unvaried against the night, the black faces, the hurricane lamp and the moths that drove by in swarms to shrivel their wings against it. Mark shovelled them from the table in handfuls, and Gissi didn't watch his harp or his fingers or his friends; he looked away smiling gently at the hopping wingless moths. He was not a handsome man, he was beautiful as a woman can be beautiful, without effeminacy. His round skull and tiny ears, projecting lower lip and long curling eyelashes had nothing in common with the buck negro type, who represents Africa to the European,

lounging round the bars off Leicester Square, beating the piano in dance orchestras. His chin was very gently moulded, his hair fitted his head like a skull-cap; he was more Grecian than African, early Grecian before the decadence. He wore an elephant-hide bracelet and a silver ring.

The goat-herd came and danced, stamping and flinging out his arms, and one by one the men came out of the dark on to the verandah, into the lamp-light, hurling themselves this way and that, sending the shadows flying from their arms and legs. Their faces were strange but soon they were to become familiar, for these were the labourers whom Vande, my newly-appointed headman, had found for me, to carry fifty-pound weights for four weeks on end, for three shillings a week and their food. It sounded to a stranger next door to slave labour, but these were not slaves stamping up and down with a controlled wildness and an unconscious grace. There was Amah, my second headman, a tall sullen humourless Mandingo with a shaven head in a long blue and white robe; there was Babu, a Buzie man like Gissi with the same delicate cultured features, the features of a tribe sensitive to art and fear, weavers of exquisite cloth, in touch more than any tribe with the supernatural, makers of lightning, poisoners; Fadaï, a gentlemanly boy from Sierra Leone with soft sad eyes, infected with yaws; there was one-eyed shaven shifty Vande Two.

They didn't speak a word as they swayed and stamped; each improvised, dancing alone with no reference to the others; it was only the music and the shadows which lent them unity. I was to see

these improvised dances again and again during the long trek. The slightest hint of a tune would set them off; if there was no music someone would tap a twig on an empty tin. They were more easy to appreciate than the communal dances. They had obvious dramatic qualities and one could see hidden under the personal idiosyncrasies the germ of the Charleston. But to the native, I suppose, the communal dance was on a higher, more subtle level; only one hadn't oneself got a clue to their appreciation. I saw such a dance in the village. A band of youths with drums chanted an air, while about seven boys shuffled in a small circle with their hands at their sides, one foot forward, the other brought up beside it, then forward again. Presently three girls joined them and the circle became smaller than ever: a girl's nipples bulged against the back in front, her buttocks were pressed by the girl behind. Round and round they went to the monotonous beat, a snake eating its own tail.

That night of dancing on the verandah was specially memorable because it was the last at Bolahun. The next day the real journey was going to begin. Amedoo had returned from hospital; even Van Gogh, pale as a ghost under his bleached gold stubble, a curiously intellectual sensitive face for a prospector (he treated the natives with a harsh lack of consideration one would never have guessed existed behind the horn-rimmed glasses), had staggered over for a cup of tea. Long study of the manuscript maps the Dutch prospectors had made of the Western province, consultations with the German linguist, had decided us to take a different and longer route. I

wanted to deliver my letter to Chief Nimley, and so I planned to walk down to Sinoe and Nana Kru, first striking along the northern border to Ganta, where an American medical missionary, Dr. Harley, might be expected to know something of the route. Nobody in Bolahun had been so far as Ganta, but the German doctor at the hospital had been to Zigita, and there one might expect to get more information. The fathers with a saintly trust in human nature cashed my cheque for £40 in small silver on a trading firm in Monrovia and sold me two hammocks which could be carried by two men apiece. With these light hammocks I hoped to economise in men and time.

The first stop, so at first it was decided, was to be Pandemai, and I sent off two carriers ahead to warn the chief, but as we talked at tea, the distance to Pandemai seemed to increase while the kindness one might look for from the chief in Kpangblamai became more desirable. The truth was, I couldn't help being a little scared. I wanted to break the strangeness and wildness gently.

Mark I had decided to add to the company as interpreter, jester and gossip. I hadn't been able to resist the letter he thrust on me one day over the verandah.

Sir In honour to ask you that I am willingly to go with you down Monrovia please kindly I beg you. Because you love me so dearly I don't want you must live me here again, and More over I am too little to take a load. I will be assisting the hammock till we reach. Me and the headman. Please sir

don't live me here again. I was fearing to tell you last night please Master, good master and good servant. I am yours ever friend Mark.

It proved always possible, however tired and vexed and sick I felt, to gain a little of the old zest at second-hand through Mark, for Mark had never seen the sea nor a ship nor a brick house. It was the greatest adventure he was ever likely to have and he was still only a schoolboy. One could see in his avid gaze at new people and new customs the dramatising instinct at work: he was going to have stories to tell when he got back to school.

Now on the verandah, with the dancers, apprehensions gathered. This was the last rest-house we would occupy for a long while. It was to be native huts after this. I remembered what the sisters had said of the rats which swarmed in every native hut. You couldn't, they said, keep them off your bed; the mosquito net was useless; once a sister had woken to find a rat sitting on her pillow savouring the oil on her hair. But you soon got used to rats, they said. They were right, but I didn't believe them. I had never got used to mice in the wainscot, I was afraid of moths. It was an inherited fear, I shared my mother's terror of birds, couldn't touch them, couldn't bear the feel of their hearts beating in my palm. I avoided them as I avoided ideas I didn't like, the idea of eternal life and damnation. But in Africa one couldn't avoid them any more than one could avoid the supernatural. The method of psychoanalysis is to bring the patient back to the idea which he is repressing: a long journey backwards without

maps, catching a clue here and a clue there, as I caught the names of villages from this man and that, until one has to face the general idea, the pain or the memory. This is what you have feared, Africa may be imagined as saying, you can't avoid it, there it is creeping round the wall, flying in at the door, rustling the grass, you can't turn your back, you can't forget it, so you may as well take a long look.

A dog ran whining across the verandah, between the dancers' legs, and off down the path to the convent. Some instinct told it to keep moving; it slathered and whined and ran; it had been bitten by a snake. The sisters had called in a medicine man who had poured medicine down its throat and tied sticky charms to its legs, but these the sisters had removed when the man had gone. It was still alive, but it had to keep on running.

It wasn't so good when the dancers went. Neither of us felt too happy; I couldn't help remembering C. and Van Gogh. My cousin had been bitten all over (if by mosquitoes, then malaria might easily find us less than half-way through the forest). I had a rash over my back and arms like the rash of chicken-pox. I didn't feel so well: perhaps I had drunk too much whisky. There did seem to be an air of sickness about the prospect; Amedoo's lung and Van Gogh's fever contributed to it. After dinner I went out to the last pail-closet I should see before Monrovia; the wooden seat, of course, was swarming with ants, but I realised by this time that it was luxury to have a closet at all. We had discovered we hadn't enough lamps with us. The boys needed both lamps while they were washing up the dinner things, which meant that we

must sit in the waning light of our two electric torches. The mosquito-netting over the windows and door was broken and anything came in, large horse-flies, cockroaches, beetles, cockchafer, and moths. Now and then to save light we sat in darkness. It was a grim evening and our nerves were rather strained. Big spiders dashed up and down the wall, the filter in the corner slowly and regularly dripped, a tomtom was beating somewhere some message, probably about the President's coming, and a big black moth the size of a bat flapped against the walls. The only thing to do was to go to bed early and sleep well.

But that was impossible; a great storm of rain beat upon the roof and afterwards it was too cold to sleep properly, just as in the day it had been too hot to walk. I dreamed uneasily I was present at the assassination of the President. It took place in Bolahun close to one of the green leafy arches they had raised in case he passed that way, between the borders of the path where the pineapple plants were sprinkled with white powder which meant "There is joy in our hearts at your coming." He was shot in a carriage by one of the drummers I saw at Tailahun and I tried in vain to send the story to a newspaper. At four I woke and got out of bed, without putting on my shoes, and found my vest, it was so cold. I knew some days later that I had caught a jigger by my carelessness, the small insect which burrows into the toe under the skin and lays its eggs and goes on multiplying until it is cut out. I slept again and had more restless dreams: that there was a case of yellow fever in Bolahun and I was put in quarantine and my diary was burnt; I woke weeping with fury. I began

more than ever to wish I hadn't got to go at dawn. The process of psycho-analysis may be salutary, but it is not at first happy. This place was luxury, it was civilised in a way that I was used to and could understand. It was foolish to be dissatisfied, to want to penetrate any further. People had made their home here. I thought of the five sisters who had come from Malvern; I thought of the young German doctor with his duelling scars and his portrait of Hitler. He was the best kind of Nazi; he had been given the strength and the enthusiasm and the hope, and he hadn't been in Germany to see the dirty work done. His wife, dark and thin and lovely in a fierce tired way, had borne her first child at the mission three weeks before. Bolahun in the early morning of the last day seemed a lovely place, where oranges were twelve a penny and mangoes three for a farthing and bananas so cheap that one hadn't time to eat them before the ants and flies got into them. These were what I remembered most clearly through the monotony of the forest: the lovely swooping flight of the small bright rhee-birds, the fragile yellow cotton flowers growing with no stalk directly out of the canes, something like a wild rose, transparent primrose petals with a small red centre and a black stamen; butterflies, palms, goats and rocks and great straight silver cotton trees, and through the canes the graceful walking women with baskets on their heads. This was what I carried with me into new country, an instinctive simplicity, a thoughtless idealism. It was the first time, moving on from one place to another, that I hadn't expected something better of the new country than I had found in the old, that I was

prepared for disappointment. It was the first time, too, that I was not disappointed.

New Country

Coming into Riga three years before, I had deceived myself into thinking I was on the verge of a relationship with something new and lovely and happy as the train came out from the Lithuanian flats, where the peasants were ploughing in bathingslips, pushing the wooden plough through the stiff dry earth, into the shining evening light beside the Latvian river. I had left Berlin in the hard wooden carriage at midnight; I hadn't slept and I'd eaten nothing all day. There was a Polish Jew in the carriage who had been turned out of Germany; he couldn't speak any English and I could speak no German, but a little stout Esthonian girl who had been a servant in London could speak both. She was an Esthonian patriot, she hadn't a good word for Riga, she regarded the grey spires beyond the river with firm peasant contempt.

And there *was* something decayed, 'Parisian', rather shocking in an old-fashioned way about the place. One could see why someone so fresh and unspoiled was disgusted. The old bearded droshky drivers and their bony haggard horses at the station were like the illustrations to a very early translation of *Anna Karenina*; they were like crude and foxed wood engravings. They must have dated back to the days when Riga was a pleasure resort for Grand Dukes, a kind of aristocratic Brighton to which one slipped away from a duchess's bed with someone

from the theatre, someone to be described in terms of flowers and pink ribbons, chocolates and champagne in the slipper, of black silk stockings and corsets. All the lights in Riga were dimmed by ten: the public gardens were quite dark and full of whispers, giggles from hidden seats, excited rustles in the bushes. One had the sensation of a whole town on the tiles. It was fascinating, it appealed immensely to the historical imagination, but it certainly wasn't something new, lovely and happy.

Even the street women were period. They were not, poor creatures, young enough to be brazen under what little light there was, though they had a depraved air of false youth as if they knew their only hope was to appeal to the very old. Their manners too, one felt, dated back to the Grand Dukes. Their allure was concentrated in an ankle, a garter, which they would bend down to adjust with a dreadfully *passé* gesture of allurements. Their street manners were infinitely more elegant than the street manners of London, but they weren't in the picture any longer. There were no more Grand Dukes on the spree to be attracted by their immature girlish legs, their corseted waists, their slipping garters, their black silk stockings; unless perhaps one of the old droshky drivers was a Grand Duke. It was not improbable. At Tallinn a Baron carried luggage at the air-port. And there could be no more suitable ending of an evening than for a street-walker to go home with the droshky driver; the garter with the long grey Franz Josef whiskers.

You couldn't really pity them. They belonged so completely to a different world. A war and a revolu-

tion came between, left you on one side with the little stout Esthonian peasant girl who spoke English and German and didn't trouble to flirt, and them with the ikons in the second-hand shops, the Orthodox priest selling pictures on the pavement, a wilderness of empty champagne bottles. . . .

It was a late winter evening when I drove through into the Nottingham suburb from the station, round streets quite as dark as Riga's, down and down below the castle rock and the municipal art gallery with the rain breaking on the windows. I had a job, it excited and scared me, I was twenty-one, and you couldn't talk of darkest Africa with any conviction when you had known Nottingham well: the dog sick on the mat, the tinned salmon for tea and the hot potato chips for supper carried into the sub-editor's room ready-salted in strips of newspaper (if you had won the football sweep you paid for the lot). The fog came down in the morning and stayed till night. It wasn't a disagreeable fog; it lay heavy and black between the sun and the earth; there was no light but the air was clear. The municipal 'tart' paced up and down by the largest cinema, old and haggard and unused. Her trade was spoilt; there were too many girls about who hadn't a proper sense of values, who would give you a good time in return for a fish tea. The trams creaked round the goose market, and day after day the one bookshop displayed a card in the window printed with Mr. Sassoon's poem:

Have you forgotten yet? . . .

Look up, and swear by the green of the
Spring that you'll never forget.

Somebody must have put it in the window for Armistice Day, and there it stayed, like the Poppy Day posters in Freetown, through the winter months, black sooty dripping months.

In Nottingham I was instructed in Catholicism, travelling here and there by tram into new country with the fat priest who had once been an actor. (It was one of his greatest sacrifices to be unable to see a play.) The tram clattered by the Post Office: "Now we come to the Immaculate Conception"; past the cinema: "Our Lady"; the theatre: a sad slanting look towards *The Private Secretary* (it was Christmas time). The cathedral was a dark place full of inferior statues. I was baptised one foggy afternoon about four o'clock. I couldn't think of any names I particularly wanted, so I kept my old name. I was alone with the fat priest; it was all very quickly and formally done, while someone at a children's service muttered in another chapel. Then we shook hands and I went off to a salmon tea, the dog which had been sick again on the mat. Before that I had made a general confession to another priest: it was like a life photographed as it came to mind, without any order, full of gaps, giving at best a general impression. I couldn't help feeling all the way to the newspaper office, past the Post Office, the Moroccan café, the ancient whore, that I had got somewhere new by way of memories I hadn't known I possessed. I had taken up the thread of life from very far back, from so far back as innocence.

CHAPTER TWO

HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

"Boss of the Whole Show"

MARK called me at five in the morning, scrabbling against the mosquito-wire. I was sending him ahead with the Mandingo Amah to warn the chief at Kpangblamai of our arrival, of my need of a hut and food for about thirty men, and to ask him to send a messenger to the chief at Pandemai to warn him that I should not be coming after all. I packed my Revelation suitcase and Amah took it, striding off down the path into the village. He wouldn't be home for weeks, but all his belongings were tied up in a rag the size of a workman's handkerchief.

It was seven-thirty before I followed. The long column of carriers slipped down from the mission hill into the mist. Vande, the headman, left the column for a few minutes and disappeared between the huts to say good-bye to his wife. He had a cloth cap, a loose shirt and shorts; he carried no load, taking with him for a few days his young brother to carry his bundle; he was very like an English foreman, cheerful, unexact, a pipe-smoker. When he wasn't smoking he was shaking a rattle made of two tiny gourds filled with seeds. He kept to the tail of the column staying behind with any man who needed a rest.

For the first mile along the wide beaten way to-

wards Kolahun a piccaninny followed at a jog-trot. He was about two feet high; he carried an empty sausage tin and an empty Ideal milk tin, one in each hand. Men turned and told him to go back, but he wouldn't obey; he had to run to keep up, but he kept up. He wanted to go with his father. The men laughed and shouted up the line and presently his father turned back and ordered him home. The line passed them and went on: they stood there, the tiny child sullen and unhappy and obstinate, the father telling him to go back as one says "Home" to a dog. At last he left him there, stubbornly planted.

The broad red clay road had been improved for the President's coming, the trees had been cut down on either side and the trunks tipped into the great palmy ravines. The heavy mist lay low between the hills; one couldn't see how close one was to the great forest. A deer sprang across the road, a little brown deer which might have belonged to an English park, not the royal antelope which lucky travellers may still see in the Republic, no larger than a rabbit, except for its slim legs, ten inches high with horns of less than an inch. The road was all right so long as the mist held, but all the shade had been cut away, and I hurried to leave it behind before the sun had reached the middle sky. It was half-past nine when the road came to an end in Kolahun, the headquarters of Mr. Reeves.

It occurred to me that though I had been told that the President had gone, and Mr. Reeves presumably with him, it would be wise at least to inquire for the Commissioner. The town seemed empty, the green triumphal arches for the President were dusty

and wrinkled with heat; one two-storeyed concrete house stood apart from the huts in a compound where the star and stripes dangled from a post. This was the house built, according to the natives of Bolahun, with forced labour. That extra storey gave it a formidable air; it stood there above the town as if it watched and knew all that happened; it would be unwise to pass it by with such a long caravan of men; it couldn't help noticing.

Everything was very still, very Sabbath; nobody left the huts to see us come in, which was odd (the town might have been sacked) but I noticed when we were nearer that there were about a dozen soldiers, in the scarlet caps with the gold star, marching up and down in the compound. At the other end of the town on a hill was a kind of garden shelter and I could see the scarlet cap there too. A small yellow-faced half-caste in a black fez came down from the compound and waited for me. Yes, he said, the Commissioner was there, and immediately led the way back into the compound between the sentries, leaving the carriers and the servants outside. I had the impression that we had been expected; and how could we not have been if it were anyone's duty to watch the road from the first storey?

A gramophone was playing, and Miss Josephine Baker's voice drifted across the compound with an amusing and sophisticated melancholy. It made everything for the moment rather unreal: the carriers sitting in the dust, the quiet drift of huts, the forest edging up over the horizon became no more than a backcloth for a lovely unclothed cabaret figure. One couldn't really believe in Mr. Reeves, who

appeared in a sinister melodramatic way from behind some curtains dressed in a scarlet fez and a long native robe; his heavy black Victorian side-whiskers, his thick grey skin, his voluptuous mouth were just part of the Paris revue. But somebody turned the gramophone off upstairs, and we were removed at once from the dour company of Mr. Reeves by a smart miniature black officer with glittering gaiters. He said, "Won't you come upstairs? The President will see you in a moment."

It was quite unexpected. I hadn't asked to see the President, I had believed that the President was in another part of the country, and I was a little taken aback. I was in a shirt and shorts with a water-bottle at my side; I was very conscious of the dust I had collected on the way, and I remembered all the stories I had heard of the Liberian rulers, how they liked to keep a white man waiting and demanded that he should always be suitably clothed for an interview.

We sat down in a tiny upper room and a soldier with a revolver holster changed the record. Miss Edith Olivier's *Dwarf's Blood* lay on the table. The black officer was very neat, very gentle, very attentive; he was like a china figure which has been kept carefully dusted. Presently a young woman came in; she wore European dress: she looked more Chinese than African. She had slanting eyes and a quality of deep repose. She didn't speak a word, though the officer presented her as "one of the President's entourage", but sitting down beside the gramophone she took up a pack of cards and began to shuffle them. Her father, I learnt later, had been made a justice of the supreme court: there is a dis-

tingly Stuart air about the civilisation of the Liberian Coast.

She was the loveliest thing I saw in Liberia; I couldn't keep my eyes off her. I wanted to talk to her, somehow to express the pleasure the sight of her gave in the empty sun-cracked place. Josephine Baker's voice couldn't compete with her, whining out at the end of the record before the soldier could change it. It was as if suddenly one saw what Africa might be if she were left to herself to choose from Europe only what would beautify her; she promised more than the frozen rhetoric in the declaration of independence. I never said a word to her ("Very hot marching in this weather," the little shining officer said politely, making small talk), I only saw her once again from a distance when she stood on the President's balcony in Monrovia watching the Krus demonstrate their loyalty below, but she remains the kind of vivid memory which draws one back to a place, even after many years.

Then the President came in: a middle-aged man called Barclay with curly greying hair in a thick dark suit, a pinned and pinched old school tie and a cheap striped shirt. Africa, lovely, vivid and composed, slipped away, and one was left with the West Indies, an affable manner, and rhetoric, lots of rhetoric. But there was a lot of energy, too: he was a politician in the Tammany Hall manner, but I never saw any reason to change my opinion that he was something new on the Coast. He might be out to play his own game, but he was going to play it with unexampled vigour and the Republic would at least pick up some chips from his table. I asked him whether his

authority was much the same as the American President's. He said it was more complete. "Once elected," he said, "and in charge of the machine"—words ran away with him; something candid and childlike and excited continually peeped through the politician's dignified phrases—"why then, I'm boss of the whole show."

Liberian politics were like a crap game played with loaded dice. But in the past it had been the custom to give the other fellow a chance with the dice. There was a kind of unwritten law that the President could take two terms of office and then he had to let another man in to pick the spoils. It was a question of letting, for, as Mr. Barclay said, the President was boss of the whole show; the newspapers were his; most important of all, he printed and distributed the ballot papers. When Mr. King was returned in 1928 he had a majority over his opponent, Mr. Faulkner, of 600,000, although the whole electoral roll amounted to less than 15,000. But Barclay was altering that; he wasn't playing fair in his opponent's eyes; he was treating politics seriously and he has some claim to be known as the Republic's first dictator. The term of office had hitherto been four years, but Mr. Barclay was to hold a plebiscite at the same time as the presidential election and increase the term to eight years. He could use the same means to put that through as he could put through a fabulous majority: he had the printing press. He had, too, the Civil Service. He explained to me, beaming with gold-rimmed benevolence, how he had cleaned it up and removed it from political influence, had instituted examinations in place of nominations.

What he failed to mention was the small string he kept in his fingers. When candidates of equal merit were presented—and that was very easy to arrange—the President himself had the right of choice.

But one had to admit that this man had energy and courage; he was worth a dozen Kings, and his hands were comparatively clean. He had been Mr. King's secretary of state, but the League of Nations commission, which had found the President personally responsible for shipping forced labour to the little dreadful Spanish island, Fernando Po, and for countenancing the mild form of slavery that enabled a man to pawn his children, had exonerated Barclay. The only real blot in the eyes of the outside world on his administration was the Kru campaign described in the Blue Book from which I have quoted, and for that the man on the spot was chiefly responsible, Colonel Elwood Davis, the black mercenary from North America. No President before Barclay had dared to tour the interior. Mr. King had travelled rapidly down from the Sierra Leone border with two hundred soldiers, but the President now had with him only thirty men. I could see almost the whole lot of them marching up and down the compound. The tribes, of course, since Mr. King's day, had been disarmed by Colonel Davis, they had no more than a few guns in every town, but they had swords and spears and cutlasses.

The President, it is true, didn't linger. He travelled very rapidly, forcing the pace, up paths he was not expected to use, and his inquiries were very brief. I have said that the natives in Bolahun had no hopes that Mr. Reeves would be ever brought to book.

Their doubts were justified, for I heard later that when the President arrived, the chiefs, who had been bribed or intimidated, had no complaints to make. He was able to return as rapidly to Monrovia as he had come. He said that everywhere the population had been enthusiastic, but dances are easily arranged and it is not much trouble to build triumphal arches of greenery and sprinkle white powder. I never came across a single native in the interior who had a good word for the politicians in Monrovia. If they preferred one ruler to another it was simply because they were happier under one Commissioner than another. Everywhere in the north I found myself welcomed because I was a white, because they hoped all the time that a white nation would take the country over.

This attitude is unreasonable, but their minds do not move on the level of reason. To accept a black overlord offended some deep communal instinct which was unaffected by the fact that under the worst black Commissioner they had not suffered what the natives in French West Africa had suffered under white Commissioners. They did not take into account at all from what they were saved by the nominal nature of black rule. In that rough, unmapped country, if they were twenty miles from a Commissioner's headquarters, they were fifty years away. They were left alone to their devils and secret societies and private terrors, to the paternal oppression of their chiefs. They weren't interfered with as they would certainly have been interfered with in a white colony, and one was thankful for their lack of education, when one compared them

as they were in Buzie country, striding along the narrow forest paths, the straight back, the sword with an ivory handle swinging against the long native robe, with the anglicised 'educated' blacks of Sierra Leone, the drill suits and the striped shirts and the dirty sun-helmets. Every head of a family in this tribe had his sword and wore it when he left his village, every young man had his dagger, and even the tool of the men working on the farms, the broad-bladed cutlass in its beautifully-worked leather sheath, had an air of chivalry, of an older civilisation than the tin shacks on the Coast. Even the poorer tribes beyond the Buzie country, the Gios and the Manos, with their loin-cloths and sores, were not more neglected than were the natives of a Protectorate under the care of a single sanitary inspector.

Hospitality in Kpangblamai

His Excellence the President talked for more than an hour in the little room above the Sunday-stricken town. He was very courteous, and it went against the grain to deceive him and give the impression that Zigita was the farthest extent of the journey I intended to take. The Commissioners in the Western Province had been warned of my coming, and I wanted as quickly as possible to slip over into a province where I was not expected. As quickly as possible . . . but it was not easy to stem the rolling tide of the President's hopes, the roads, the aeroplanes, the motor-cars. It was a paradoxical situation; a black preaching progress to a sceptical white, but the white had come out of the busy bustling

progressive scene and he had noticed there nothing more lovely than the Buzie cloths the President spread for his inspection. There was nothing crudely peasant, nothing art and crafty, nothing to remind one of stalls at bazaars and dear ladies with pale-blue bulbous eyes, about these cloths: they were sophisticated in their design, but the sophistication had a different source from ours. It sprang directly from a deeper level; it wasn't tinged by the artistic self-consciousness of centuries.

There was a world of difference between these cloths and the Mandingo cloths from French Guinea, one of which I had bought in the market at Bolahun and which can be bought, too, at double the price, on the Coast, at Freetown and Monrovia. The Mandingo is a trader, his line of country is immense when it is computed less in mileage than in difficulty: in forest, swamp, river and flood. One finds him in the ports, one finds him five hundred miles in the interior in places where no white man has been seen in living memory. He is unmistakable: his height and shaven head, his Semitic features, his air in his scarlet fez and his long robe, a verse of the Koran hung round the neck, of a long trading lineage. He rides the only horses to be seen in the interior, but more often he does the journey on foot. In French Guinea I met a Mandingo who could tell me the whole route to the Coast at Cape Palmas or Grand Bassa. He made the wild four weeks' journey as regularly as a traveller in silk stockings who catches the Brighton Belle once a week. But the cloths, the swords and knives they carry with them are not superior to the peasant arts of Central

Europe; they have the same crude tourist stamp; lozenges of bright crude colours on the heavy cloth. And this is interesting when one considers that there are no tourists in French Guinea, and few white men at all in the far corner of the colony which touches Liberia. The trade goods have to be carried through hundreds of miles of forest to reach the kind of public which enjoys the bogus gaudy article.

It was all against the proper White House etiquette, I felt, but it was I who had to make the move to end the interview, for I began to fear that it would be dark before I reached Kpangblamai. I was still following roughly the route which Sir Alfred Sharpe took in his journey through Liberia in 1919. All the way along this northern border the ground is high, generally about sixteen hundred feet, and the ground broken. Sir Alfred Sharpe wrote after his journey that he had never been in any part of Africa where the going was so bad, but at least it isn't monotonous like the way through the central forest, where there is no variation in the narrow paths, the dull tangled greenery, where there is nothing to see for hours on end but the carrier's feet and the tree-roots. Here, between Kolahun and Kpangblamai, there were hills to scramble over, the Mano River to cross on a wide bridge of twisted creeper, the great swallow-tailed butterflies swarming at the water-courses, tiny winged primroses resting on the damp sand and rising in clouds round our waists, and once a little ferny, bracken glade, warm and sweet like an English summer.

These first few days of trekking had a beauty that later one completely missed: everything was new,

the villages with the women pounding rice, the cluster of stones where the chiefs were buried, the cows rubbing their horns along the huts; the taste of warm, boiled and filtered water in the dried mouth; the sense, above all, that one was getting somewhere, that one was going deeper. It made me walk fast, faster than my carriers and my companion. A march, this first week, was a dash; my hammock-men, as I didn't use my hammock, kept my pace, and an evasive half-relationship developed from shared oranges, the rests at the water-courses, where they drank out of the empty meat tins they carefully preserved and I from my bottle. . . .

Babu was one of these men, the Buzie: he played the harp tentatively when we rested; he couldn't speak a word of English, but he had amused friendly reliable ways of showing that he was on your side in the arguments which soon came thick and fast. He was one of the few carriers who smoked a pipe, a small clay pipe, and one could imagine him a season-ticket-holder, the reliable support of his mother and sisters in a remote sad suburb. For there was an undertone of sadness which grew as the trek went on; he wasn't strong enough for the work; he didn't complain, he was completely reliable until he was simply too sick to go farther. He was at first the only Buzie man with us; he didn't mix easily but sat apart with his pipe, sometimes coming up to the door of my hut to smile his good wishes and go away again.

The other man on the first day who went ahead with me was Alfred. Alfred was another type altogether, in his cloth cap and shorts. He had learnt to read and write, he knew English; he thought he

was out for a jaunt. Plump and sweaty and horribly ingratiating, he managed to be the one who carried the harp and not the empty hammock. He pointed out everything which he considered of interest, he hung around; but among the men he was the focus of discontent; he always knew that a town was "too far", I could hear his fat grumble doing its work whenever a group gathered together to voice their complaints, and a moment later there he would be, back at my side, doing me a little service, oily and friendly and proud of his English.

Kpangblamai was about four and a half hours' march from Kolahun. It appeared quite unexpectedly towards the end of the worst heat on the usual hill-top, and there was Mark running dramatically down to meet us at the stream. He had a school friend with him, Peter, the chief's son, and he said he had "plenty plenty fine house" covered with pictures. So it was: rectangular, like a small stable with two stalls and a verandah. The stalls were bedrooms, containing native beds, platforms of beaten earth spread with matting. The walls were papered thickly with old advertisements and photographs out of illustrated papers, most of them German or American. Over a chair made out of an old packing-case was an article by General Pershing on Youth; beautiful women showed their teeth brushed with Chlorodone, handsome men displayed their ready-made suitings, somebody wondered why she wasn't a social success, and a man in uniform denounced a clause of the Treaty of Versailles. It was a really fine house, the only one like it in the town; we didn't have another lodging in a native town so good before Monrovia.

The chief at Kpangblamai was overpoweringly hospitable. I hadn't time to sit down and rest and take a drink before the old man arrived, wizened and reserved, in a turban and a kind of liberty robe which was like the tea-gowns worn at Edwardian literary teas. He brought with him his headman, who wore a robe of the ordinary blue and white striped native cloth and a battered bowler hat. He was even older than the chief, they neither could speak a word of English, but while from the chief's manner I gathered an impression of a rather sad tired benevolence, the headman was full of shrewdness, satire, salacious humour. He giggled in a sly way; he had, I felt sure, the low-down on the whole town; he wasn't, like the chief, an idealist; if he had belonged to another race, he would have been one of those elderly men who pinch girls' bottoms on buses in a friendly, harmless way. Chief and headman were inseparable; they went everywhere together like the higher and the lower nature.

Now they had brought with them a basin full of eggs (every one of which proved to be bad), a huge basket of oranges, and three gourds of palm wine. For the first time I was thirsty enough to enjoy palm wine; I drank one gourdful not realising the danger of dysentery if it wasn't fresh or the gourd was dirty; it was the colour of stone ginger beer and had a soft flat taste like barley water. The chief and the headman sat down on the native bed and I gave them cigarettes. Nobody spoke. Presently they got up and went away, but a minute later the chief returned with a chicken. That first day I didn't know the right etiquette; I dashed back for each present when it

arrived; and the presents multiplied rapidly. Later I learnt from Amedoo that I should dash once only at the end of my stay.

I was longing for a wash and I hadn't had time to shave before I left Bolahun, but the hospitable chief kept me on the run. No sooner had he gone after presenting the chicken than his son came in to say that the devil would dance for the visitors: so with the chief and the headman we sat out in the blazing sun and waited for the devil to appear. This time it was a devil belonging to a woman's society, a devil from Pandemai in Buzie country, who was travelling to Kolahun to dance before the President.

It came out between the last huts at the end of the wide little whitewashed town, then swayed and simpered forward in a country robe, swinging a great raffia bustle, nodding its black mask. The bustle swung up and showed huge pantaloons of fibre, like a caricature of a Victorian dress. One remembered Miss Tilly Losch in a Cochran revue hesitating before a pillar-box with just this air of coyness, the sophisticated copy of something young and artless. This devil seemed to a European to have a mock female, mock modest manner, which was curiously and interestingly gross when combined with the long cruel mask, the slanting eyes, the heavy mouth. It turned and turned, swinging the bustle above the pantaloons, and the interpreter ran round and round carrying a small whip. There was something about it of the witch of one's childhood; perhaps because it remained so feminine even while it was unrecognisable as a woman; perhaps because of its curious headgear; the tall tufted pole taking the place of the

sugar-loaf hat. It sank on to the ground and recited its greetings on a low gushing note. It was a far more accomplished dancer than Landow. To compare Landow's wild rushes, matching the great crude muzzle, with the simpering silly sinister gait of this woman's devil was like comparing brutality with cruelty. It may have been a tribal difference: no Bande craftsman could have made this mask. Landow's was a mask of childish fancy running in the vein of nightmare: this was a work of conscious art in the service of a belief.

After the dance the chief's son, Peter Bonoh, said that his father wished to show the visitors his town. The whole length of Kpangblamai cannot have exceeded a hundred and fifty yards, but before we had seen all the activities of that small settlement, I felt much as a member of the royal family must feel after a tour of an industrial fair. I had been allowed no rest after the march, the palm wine was lying heavy in my stomach, there was no air on the baked plateau, and I thought that I was going to faint before I reached the end. Five weavers were at work, each under his own little shelter of palm branches; a man was cutting leather sheaths for daggers; and in the smithy they were making blades, one man working a great leather bellows, another beating out the white-hot blade (I would have paid them more attention if I had known then the importance of the smith, how frequently he is the local devil and his word more powerful than the chief's). In front of another hut two women were spinning a kind of top upon a plate, working the thread out of a mass of cotton. In a little wooden enclosure a woman was boiling the

leaves of a forest plant in a great cauldron to make a dark-blue dye. The smell of the cauldron, the pressure of the crowd fingering my sleeves and the cloth of my trousers, the necessity of keeping my face fixed in a bright cheerful interested mask made me feel weak and ill. There seemed no end to the parade of industry. It was a tiny plateau, not much larger than the Round Pond; wherever I looked, between the shoulders of the crowd, I saw the huts give way to trees, and above the trees the high forested ridge of the Pandemai hills; but in the hot stuffy evening it seemed as endless as a maze of which one doesn't know the clue.

Two women sat on the ground smoothing out cotton as it came from the pods; a group of women were extracting the thick yellow oil out of the palm nuts; another weaver. . . . At last we were back at our hut; the chairs and tables were out; and another present arrived from the chief—a kid; it escaped and led a howling chase between the huts before it was brought back and tethered. My cousin went to bed, couldn't stand the thought of food, and I had my very English meal alone, sardines on toast, a steaming hot steak and kidney pudding, a sweet omelette washed down with whisky and orange. I was only half-way through the second course when Peter Bonoh put his head through the screen to say his father was outside, and there the old chief was, sitting in his chair at the entrance in his tea-gown and turban. He had brought an orchestra with him and all through dinner they played their monotonous tinkling tones. The chief hadn't anything to say; he sat there quite proud and happy and ignored, while

the headman giggled salaciously somewhere in the dark nearby, until at last he slipped away into the moonless night carrying his chair.

But there was one thing I had to know before I went to bed—where to go next. The doctor at the mission had spoken of an easy day's march to a place he called Dagomai, a long march the day after to Nicoboozu, and then Zigita. That was as far as he had been on the way to Ganta, but south of Zigita, at Zorzor, there was a Lutheran mission where someone might know something of the way beyond. The maps of the Dutch prospectors didn't cover the ground so far east.

The trouble was, no one had heard of Dagomai. Peter Bonoh hadn't heard of it, nor had his father or the old headman. The only town they could suggest between Kpangblamai and Zigita was Pandemai. But that wasn't far enough for a day's march, and besides I didn't expect too friendly a reception from the chief there, who had been expecting me that night. Dagomai, Dagomai, I kept on repeating in the hope that somebody would have heard of the place. Presently "Duogobmai," the chief said doubtfully. It sounded very nearly right, it was on the way to Nicoboozu, and I decided that it must be the place the doctor had meant. "Too far," Alfred said, joining in, "too far"; the carriers clustered round and he whispered to them how far it was; they hadn't begun to work together yet, they were full of jealousy and suspicion: he had the right material to his hand. But I didn't believe him; even the doctor's wife had done the march to Dagomai, and now I quite firmly believed that Duogobmai and Dagomai were the same

place. It wouldn't pay me not to believe it; time was money, and it wouldn't do to lose myself my first day loose in the Liberian interior.

For hours as I lay in bed I heard the faint music of the harps, the low sound of Alfred talking to the carriers; I wondered what I'd do if they refused to obey me. I suppose it is the thought which strikes every new prefect at school, but I had never been a prefect; I had never before so abjectly depended on other people's obedience. I was glad afterwards that I hadn't for a moment imagined that Alfred, oily, smart, ingratiating, mutinous Alfred, might be right.

It was the first time I had slept in a native hut, and foolishly, for the sake of privacy, I kept the door closed, as the natives do themselves for fear of wild animals from the forest. I had never experienced such heat; it was like a blanket over the face, even the thin muslin mosquito-net took the breath. But at any rate there were not yet rats; only a few rustles in the roof, and in the end I fell asleep in spite of Alfred's whisper, the music and the heat and the strangeness.

The Primitive

I was called at five by Mark and Amah, whom I again sent on ahead to warn the chief at Duogobmai. It was just as well to get Amah out of the way; Vande had chosen him as second headman, but already I could tell how unpopular he was. He was the only Mandingo among the carriers, and for the first week of the march tribal differences caused almost con-

tinuous trouble. He was strong, reliable, the best-looking man of a rather weedy set, but he had no sense of humour and they teased him mercilessly until he got into a sullen rage.

Mark and Amah had nearly three hours' start, for the chief's hospitality was by no means over. He gave my cousin a hideous leather satchel made in the village in the bright crude colours of Italian leather work, and his son gave me a bundle of knives from the smithy. Unfortunately his hospitality included the carriers, and he provided them with a large meal before they started.

The character of a carrier is childlike. He enjoys the moment. He cannot connect cause and effect. He is used to one meal in the day at evening, he lives on the edge of subsistence, and it would be a hard master who grudged him the unexpected pleasure of an extra meal. The chief's kindness made them for a few minutes gloriously happy; and when almost immediately they suffered from walking with heavy loads on a full stomach, they didn't connect their suffering with their pleasure. They simply felt with minds clouded by indigestion that somebody was treating them badly. It was always the same throughout the four weeks of marching; whenever they had a breakfast they worked badly, grumbled and made palavers; when food became scarce they worked well and were happy. On one occasion they spent nearly forty-eight hours without food and at the end of that time they were fresher than they had ever been.

I had been warned of this; I knew what to expect; the food hadn't been in their bellies five minutes

before rebellion stirred. But they could be distracted, too, as easily as children, and when a man presented me with a small grey monkey on a string they were temporarily happy again. They liked something to torment. They poked it with sticks. They turned it upside down. They dragged it head first in the dust. They tickled its private parts, and the little brute screamed at them and tried to bite and turned its bloodshot eyes this way and that for an escape. When they left it in peace for a moment it sat with its head in its wrinkled hands as if it were weeping. Laminah and Alfred were its chief tormentors, they were like bullies at school with a new boy who couldn't hit back; the other men were amused and tormented it occasionally when they were bored, but sometimes they were kind to it, offering it pieces of banana or kola nuts, and after a while they forgot it. Even Laminah gave up teasing it in the end, and Mark became its companion. After the first four days it went everywhere with him; it sat on his shoulder all the way through the forest until at Ganta it escaped; it rested its hands on his head and searched his hair for insects. It never tried to bite him; he never talked to it; they accepted each other in silence.

It was eight o'clock before the men had finished eating and were ready to start. They were very slow and quarrelsome, and I went on ahead with my two spare hammock-men. Alfred walked in front dangling the monkey, and Babu walked behind carrying two harps. Almost immediately we were in the forest, but it was only the edge of the great waste of bush which covers the Republic to within sight of the sea. I felt rather absurd with my two companions,

climbing up out of the forest, over the crest of a small cracked hill covered with round huts while the natives came to the door and stared at the sight of the first white man they'd seen for months. One really needed to be a minor prophet to emerge suddenly like this, almost unaccompanied, with two harps and a monkey. . . .

On a narrow path we met three men with long curved cutlasses cutting away the bush; Alfred spoke to them; they came from Pandemai. They said the chief had expected the white man the night before; he had swept a hut and cooked food for thirty men. Alfred suggested it would be a good thing to spend the night with the chief. He would be offended otherwise. Duogobmai was too far, too far. . . . He asked the men about it. They shook their heads. He said that it was more than a day's march from Pandemai. But I couldn't speak the language, and Babu, whom I trusted, couldn't speak any English, and Alfred I believed to be a liar. But liars sometimes speak the truth.

A little later a tiny stream, a patch of sand, a cloud of butterflies, marked the boundary between Bande country and Buzie country, and soon after we came out into a broad sun-drenched clearing below Pandemai. A concrete house was being built beside the path with a fence and a garden gate, and a black man in a European suit with an old white topee came out to meet me and laughed and lifted his hat and laughed again. He was a middle-aged man with a hard mean face which he had covered defensively for the occasion with an expression of silliness and subservience. He said, "Mr. Greene, we were expecting

you last night." He had the name pat, he laughed in a nervous servile way after every sentence, and there was something unmistakably clerical about his manner. One felt the Sermon on the Mount was somewhere about, though it had gone sour. He was a missionary from Monrovia, and now he was engaged in building his new mission. Like Mr. Reeves he believed in concrete and like Mr. Reeves he kept his brother blacks well in hand.

He said, "The chief had everything prepared for you last night," and again he laughed as much as to say, 'I know I'm laughable, I'm only a black and you are a white, you are laughing at me, but you needn't think I don't laugh too.' He led the way up to Pandemai, laughing and complaining all the way, not taking himself seriously, with a bitter humility which didn't really disguise the hardness and meanness below it. I wanted to go straight through; I was afraid of trouble with the carriers if they once put down their loads, but the missionary was too ready to accept my refusal as one more sign that he was despised. I couldn't give him that excuse, and now that my cousin had joined us, I let the missionary lead the way to his two-roomed hut in the town. The place was bug-ridden; we had only sat on the porch for a minute, while we ate the bananas he brought in a wooden bowl, before we realised that.

Sir Alfred Sharpe passed through Pandemai, "an old war town", in 1919. and was received with great hospitality by the local chief. Perhaps the black missionary had not then arrived: now the town seemed dead: the chief when he came, a sullen suppressed man who presented his dash of a chicken and

a pail of rice as if they had been exacted from him by force. The missionary ruled him. When, thinking of the wasted chop and the trouble he had taken the night before, I prepared to dash him five shillings in return, the missionary caught my hand. He said he couldn't allow it; there was no need to give the chief anything; I was the guest of the country. At last he allowed two shillings to pass to the chief, who stood by with a beaten smouldering air like an honest man who watches, without the power to intervene, two racketeers squabbling over his property.

The missionary calculated that Duogobmai was still six hours away. That was disquieting, for we had already marched for more than two hours, but nothing would induce me to stay. It wasn't only the unfriendly chief and the bugs in the hut; I was still planning my journey by European time: the listlessness, the *laissez-faire* of Africa hadn't caught me. I had planned to reach Duogobmai that night and to fail to reach it seemed to put back everything. I wasn't confident enough to see the journey as more than a smash-and-grab raid into the primitive. . . . There was a dream of a witch I used to have almost every night when I was small. I would be walking along a dark passage to the nursery door. Just before the door there was a linen-cupboard and there the witch waited, like the devil in Kpangblamai, feminine, inhuman. In the nursery was safety, but I couldn't pass. I would fling myself face downwards on the ground and the witch would jump. At last, after many years, I evaded her, running blindly by into sanctuary, and I never had the dream again. Now I seemed to be back in the dark passage: I had to see

the witch, but I wasn't prepared for a long or careful examination.

So I wouldn't be delayed, and though the carriers grumbled and Alfred whispered again into my ear, "Too far. Better stay here. Too far," I insisted on going on. Rather recklessly I pledged myself that it wasn't far to Duogobmai. I nursed the idea that a black always exaggerated, when the fact was they had so hazy an idea of time that they were just as likely to minimise. I said, "It's only about five hours from here. I know. The white doctor at the Holy Cross told me."

Only five hours, I thought, as the midday heat came nearer, striking up from the dry ground, catching the feet as much as did the roots of trees, beating down on one's helmet so that for moments at a time it was cooler to raise it and take the full sun on the skull. We were in the forest now, but it was still the edge where it flattened out towards the Mandingo plateau to the north: the dead dull edge of it which didn't shelter sufficiently. A few birds moved overhead, out of sight, their wings creaking like unoiled doors. A monkey ran along a branch of a great grey cotton tree, which was buttressed on the ground like a tower. It flung itself into the air at the height of a cathedral spire, dropped fifty feet and out of sight behind the palms and ivy, the tangle of greenery. The boy with the harps leapt aside at a slither in the grass. That was all the life there was, except for the long sullen chain of carriers, dropping farther and farther behind. I wondered whether they would stay the journey; if they left us I hadn't the money to reach the Coast. Would I have the nerve, I wondered,

if it came to a show-down, to refuse to pay them or would we go tamely back with them to Bolahun?

The bush got thicker; the paths narrower. It was difficult to keep one's feet among the roots. My cousin and the carriers were out of sight and hearing. Nothing seemed to live but the snakes and birds, and they were invisible, and the ants. It was a country made for ants. Their great yellow tenements, twelve feet high, broke through the bush, enchained the villages. Their swarms drove across the paths, like Carthaginian armies; the route on either side was lined with sentries; one could imagine the heaving at tiny ropes, the cracking of infinitesimal whips. Sometimes near water there were other ants, guerilla ants this time who whipped at one singly through the air and fastened their pincers in the skin: stockings couldn't keep them out: their nip was like the cut of a knife. These, one sometimes felt, were the real owners and rulers of the bush, not the men in the villages one passed every two or three hours above their scanty streams, ringed with a little plantation of kola trees, the leaves turned upwards in great ugly yellow bowls like brass epergnes; not certainly the few white men who had passed this way and left in a little cleared space beside the path an abandoned gold-working: a deep hole the size of a coffin, a few decaying wooden struts above a well of stagnant water, the ivy already creeping up. This was the ruling passion of most white men in this dead bush, a passion just as secret, needing as much evasion, kept perhaps with as much fear, as the secrets of the bush houses which stood away from the path behind a row

of stunted charred trees like funeral cypresses or a fence of woven palm leaves. A few banana trees at the edge of one village were fenced in: "the devil's bananas".

It was odd in this shabby lost bush to be told by one's guide, pointing to a tiny path, that that was the 'road' to Voinjema. The carriers were still near their own country, and though the paths were sometimes as numerous and apparently as random as a child's criss-cross scrawlings on a sheet of paper, Babu knew his way. He didn't have to hesitate; to show the route to those who came behind he would close the wrong paths with sprays of leaves. These were the only road signs in the bush.

Under the vertical sun we reached another village, I and my two spare hammock-men and Amedoo. They led me to the palaver-house, the low thatched barn in the middle of the village where the old men were drowsing out their siesta. I sat down in a hammock which was slung on one side, and the old men ranged themselves opposite and blinked and scratched. It was too hot to talk. A woman lay in a patch of shade, on her face in the dust, and slept. The chickens scratched on the floor for the grains of rice which sometimes fell between the slats of the roof. A long time passed; I wanted to scratch too. I wasn't bitten; it was a nervous reaction. The old men blinked and scratched their armpits and heads and thighs; they burrowed inside their loose robes to find a new spot to scratch. It was too hot to be really curious about anyone, though a few of the younger men of the village stooped under the thatch and sat down and stared and began to scratch. The delay

irritated me. I wanted to eat my lunch and get away, but it was nearly an hour before the carriers began to stumble in, tired and stubborn, suspicious and complaining. Alfred went round among them, urging them to rebel, gathering evidence from the villagers as to how far Duogobmai was.

But I still persisted in believing that they were wrong. I was without experience. All the white men I had met in Sierra Leone had told me how blacks must be driven, how they lied and humbugged, and it was not unnatural that I should believe they were lying now, 'trying it on', like schoolboys who are testing a new master's discipline. And as a weak master who knows his own weakness bluffs it out with a new form, unable to recognise who is truthful and who is not, alienating the honest by classing them with the dishonest, I became all the more stubborn. I ate my food very fast, so that the men might have only a short rest, I told Vande to make Alfred one of my cousin's hammock-carriers so that he might be forced to work, I wouldn't listen to their arguments.

Laminah said softly behind my chair, "Amedoo's feet very bad."

At least I had the good sense not to alienate my servants. I depended on them for any comfort that could be wrung out of the country; it was they who, however tired they were, saw first to putting up our beds and chairs, to preparing our food, to boiling water for the filter. I said, "If his foot's really bad, we'll stay."

Laminah said, "Amedoo go on. He say he no humbug."

"It'll be only three hours from here," I said. "Only

three hours, the doctor said so." They didn't believe me, but they went about among the carriers repeating what I had said; they put up a good pretence of believing. It is one of the curious things about a black servant, the way in which he includes loyalty in his service.

I am not praising him for that. One ought not to be able to buy loyalty. It enabled me to victimise my carriers. I walked straight off out of the village with my two spare men and left the carriers behind. I was paying them three shillings a week and that sum paid, not only for an eight-hour day or more of heavy carrying, but for their loyalty. The poor fools when I left them had the money-box, I was a foreigner, my servants were foreigners, they could have shared the money out and gone home. But I was almost certain, though I had known them only two days, that they would follow. I ought to have despised them, as I would have despised the little tame employee at home who puts his office first. But after a while I began to love them for it. Perhaps there is a difference. There was no trait of cowardice in their loyalty, no admission that the richer is the better man. They *did* sell their loyalty, but it was a frank sale: loyalty was worth so many bags of rice, so much palm oil. They didn't pretend an affection they didn't feel. Love was quite one-sided as it ought to be.

So they followed after me, though a long way behind. Three hours went by and there was no sign of Duogobmai. The worst midday heat wore off soon after four. Another village offered hospitality I wouldn't take. Babu and Kolieva stayed and drank

water outside one of the ragged huts, but I went stubbornly on to where the forest began again. A man followed me. He had a few words of English: he said we would never reach Duogobmai before dark. There was still another village between. But I went on: I couldn't bear the thought of waiting; I had been walking now for more than eight hours, but I had gained my second wind. One of the two men dropped behind; I was alone with Babu and the harps; it was not only the heat that was fading out of the air, the ferocity of the light between the branches was tamed.

Suddenly Babu sat down by the side of the path and changed his vest. He smiled shyly, winningly; we were coming to a town; he had to clean himself, just as much as any season-ticket-holder who straightens his tie before he gets to the City. As the light went out the forest began to rustle; one wondered whether after all it was so dead as it had seemed. I couldn't help remembering that the man in front was in the greater danger from a snake, but the man behind from a leopard, for leopards, one is told, always jump at the back. Another village lifted itself on the skyline at the green tunnel's end: the sky was grey, the huts so black that quite suddenly one realised how close night was. It would have been wise to stay, but it was a tiny village, not more than thirty huts on a little cracked hill-top. The thatch was falling in, a few horrible tiny dogs with bat ears came barking out and three old women sat on the very edge of the hill, sorting out cotton seeds, dirty and scarred and naked, like disreputable Fates. The hill dropped straight below them. They were just on the margin of life.

I didn't believe there was rice enough in the place to feed my men.

Below the hill a wide river lay flat and heavy in the evening light. It was the Loffa, which flows down into the sea about thirty miles above Monrovia. None of these Liberian rivers have been traced from their source in the French Guinea hills to the sea; their upper course is represented in the British War Office map with dotted and inaccurate lines. They usually fall in rapids about fifty miles from the coast and so commercially are of little value, but even in these calm upper reaches they are not used at all by the natives of the Republic: the only canoes one sees are ferries, and these almost all on the French border. One would expect villages to cluster round these rivers, but actually they flow through the wildest and least inhabited part of the bush until within a few days' trek of the coast. The way over the Loffa that evening was by a great hammock bridge. It was a really lovely architectural sight, seventy yards of knotted creeper swinging down from an arboreal platform fifteen feet in the air and out and up ten yards above the Loffa to another tree on the opposite bank. The foothold was about a foot wide, but it was railed on either side with creepers to the height of a man's shoulders. Sometimes the creepers had given way, and one had to stretch across the gaps while the whole bridge swung like a rope ladder.

Half-way across Mark was standing with a chicken in his hand. He was sick and tired and hungry. He could hardly stir another yard. But Amah, who had been carrying a load all day since they left more than twelve hours before, was quite fresh. He was waiting

for Mark on the other side. He had taken off his robe and was naked except for his loin-cloth. He picked up the Revelation suitcase and swung it up to his head as if he were only beginning the day's march. He was admirable when things went wrong; he sulked and grumbled only on a day of rest or after a short march. It amused him that I should have overtaken them, and he strode up the path from the Loffa laughing and chattering in Bande.

Duogobmai came in sight, a line of blackened huts at the top of a long red-clay slope. A strange pink light welled out of the air, touching the tall termite mounds which stood along the path. It seemed to have no source in the darkening sky, it gave the whole landscape, the ant-heaps and the red clay and the black huts of Duogobmai on the hill-top camp, a curious Martian air. Men ran out of the huts and looked down at us, climbing up out of the dusk and the forest.

It was quite dark when we came into the town and felt our way between the huts to find the chief's. Duogobmai looked very old and very dirty. It was like a Tudor town in its cramped crowded way; the thatch of the huts touched, one had to stoop between them, and the narrow paths were blocked with creamy moonstruck cows like Jerseys with twisted horns standing in their turd among the hens and dogs and small fierce cats and goats.

The chief was a middle-aged man with thick lips and little cunning eyes who looked more Oriental than West African in his red fez. He sat in a hammock before his hut. I couldn't tell whether he was friendly or not. He just sat there and listened to

Amah speaking, to Amah asking for huts and food for thirty men. He was a slow thinker and he was startled by our sudden appearance. He hadn't seen a white face for years. I still believed that this must be the Dagomai the doctor had directed me to, but no, the chief said, no white people had stayed here since they had begun to pay hut tax, and that was as far back as memory took him. In his slow way he was immensely tickled; it was as good as a circus. He sent some men to clean a hut.

It was quite dark: there was no moon. The blacks moved between the huts with smouldering torches, but the little cheerful embers lit only wretchedness and dirt. A few carriers tottered in and sank immediately to the ground beside their loads with their heads in their hands. There was no humbugging; they were completely exhausted. Amah led me to the hut which had been chosen for us: a small round hut with a native couch at one side, where there was just room for two beds. The chief's lamp, the only one in the village, stood on the floor and the sweepers raised clouds of dust which rose and settled again: there was a burnt-out fire in the middle. Somebody put a box on the floor and I sat down to wait. I was anxious: I couldn't imagine how my cousin and the carriers could get across the long hammock bridge in the dark, avoiding all the gaps where the creepers had given way. I sent Amah with the lamp down the hill to see if he could find them and sat in the dark and heard the first rustle of the rats above. I dropped into a doze, and nearly an hour later voices roused me, a lamp swaying between the huts, a sudden pack of worn-out men. Amedoo

rushed like a whirlwind into the hut, lashing with his stick at the legs of the few blacks who sat there with me: he could never remember that he wasn't any longer in the British Empire. He was worn out and in a despairing rage because half the carriers, he said, had stayed at the village the other side of the Loffa, refusing to cross the bridge in the dark. There were no beds, no mosquito nets, no lamps, no torches, no food, and worst of all in the blasting heat of the hut, no filter.

Old Sourì, the cook, appeared in the doorway in his black fez and his white robe which had been torn in the forest. He had a chicken in one hand and a bare knife in the other. He said, "Where de cook-house? Where de cookhouse?" Nothing, no seedy village, no ten hours' trek, could quench the old man's ruling passion.

There was nothing to do but have our hammocks slung and lie all night in them fully dressed and wrapped in blankets to keep away mosquitoes. While Amedoo and Amah prepared the hut we stumbled out of the village to relieve ourselves. We had no light, we lost our way in the coil of little huts, it was a pitch-black night except for the quivering sparks of fireflies. We struck endless matches, making water in the dry pitted ground.

And suddenly I felt curiously happy and careless and relieved. One couldn't, I was sure, get lower than Duogobmai. I had been afraid of the primitive, had wanted it broken gently, but here it came on us in a breath, as we stumbled up through the dung and the cramped and stinking huts to our lampless sleeping place among the rats. It was the worst one need fear,

and it was bearable because it was inescapable. Only one thing worried me a little: it seemed likely after a night without nets we should both go down with fever when we were farthest from both Bolahun and Monrovia, though luckily our quinine was on the right side of the Loffa.

There was no water to drink because there was no filter, and it was appallingly hot, lying covered by blankets over our clothes. My cousin was wise and bore the thirst, but in this village there was so much chance of disease that one wasn't adding to it much, I thought, by drinking two dirty gourds of palm wine. Then I had to fall back on neat whisky. The hut was too short for the hammocks to be stretched at full length; we had to sit in the dark bolt upright waiting for the rats to come. There was a bat somewhere in the roof, and I had noticed before the lamp went out a few huge cockroaches flattened against the wall.

And then luck changed. It was as if fate had been merely curious to see how the worst would affect us. Suddenly the carriers arrived with Vande grinning and happy and proud in the rear. Somehow he had persuaded them to cross the river in this pitch darkness, and there they were with the beds and nets and food and filter, sinking to the ground by the hut too tired to grumble. So after all one was protected, protected from the flies which stayed awake all night, from the mosquitoes, the cockroaches and the rats, by one's net. But it wasn't easy to sleep. Outside, the carriers sat round the lamps and had their chop and I heard vitality come slowly back to them and Alfred's voice sowing dissension. When their lamp went out the rats came. They came all together, fall-

ing heavily down the wall like water. All night they gambolled among the boxes, and the cows snuffed round the wall and made water noisily. A jigger burrowing under one of my nails burned like a match flame. By half-past five the village was awake again.

CHAPTER THREE

INTO BUZIE COUNTRY

The Horrible Village

I WASN'T surprised when the carriers struck work next morning and demanded a day's rest. They said Nico-boozu was a full day's journey away. I sent for the chief and Mark interpreted. The chief said Nico-boozu was seven hours off; he was lying or Mark was lying. But I had stood out against the carriers once before and had been proved wrong. Now they didn't believe me: they believed I was driving them hard on purpose, and so I granted their demand promptly to try to win their confidence again. But it took me more than one day to do that. They were like children who have caught a grown-up lying to them.

It wasn't a place I would have chosen to rest in. It was a really horrible village. The only thing to do in it was to get drunk. I noted in my diary, "A woman goes round scraping up the cow and goat dung with her hands, children with skin disease, whelping bitches and little puppies with curly tails and bat ears nosing among the food Souris is cooking for us in the dust outside a hut, skinny chickens every-

where, dust getting into the throat. Roofs touching. Indelible pencil all over the hands. Damp pages. Lot of trouble with the carriers. A long walk to get away from the village to relieve oneself."

It would have been stuffy anyway in the narrow space between the huts, but all day a crowd of villagers crushed out what little air there was. They had never before had a chance of examining white people closely. I couldn't take out a handkerchief without a craning of heads, nor raise a pencil without a pressing forward of watchers who didn't want to miss a thing. This intent unamused stare got on the nerves. And they were so ugly, so diseased. The thought of disease began to weigh on my mind; I seemed to swallow it in the dust which soon inflamed my throat; I couldn't forget where the dust had come from, from the dung and the bitches and the sores on the feet.

Only a few of the women broke the monotonous ugliness of the place. The adults had been beautifully and elaborately cut in bush school; the patterns were like metal plaques spread from the breasts to the navel; and there was one small girl in a turban with slanting Oriental eyes and small neat breasts who did appeal to a European sexual taste even in her dirt. To their eyes she was probably less attractive than the village beauty who gazed at herself all day in a little scrap of cracked mirror, a girl with swelling buttocks and smeared and whitened breasts which hung in flat pouches to her waist. It was curious how seldom they did appeal: perhaps sexual vitality was lowered by the heat and the marches, but it was partly, I think, their lack of sexual self-consciousness.

They weren't, until we came near to the Coast and 'civilisation', interested in the sex of their visitors, but only in their colour or their clothes. The nakedness, too, was monotonous; it brought home how few people, and for how short a period of their lives, one can see naked with any pleasure.

There was something shifty and mean about Duogobmai, even apart from its dirt. It was the only place, until I got into Bassa country where the coastal civilisation had corrupted the natives, in which I found nothing to admire. The chief was a Mohammedan, but no sooner had I produced a bottle of my whisky than he arrived with a present of palm wine and some eggs, all of which were bad. I gave him half a tumblerful of neat whisky and he tossed it down as if it were lemonade, then rolled away towards his hut. An agreeable and depraved old man with thin white hair twisted into tiny pigtales brought two eggs; he was the oldest man in Duogobmai, the owner of the hut; and he explained through Mark that he didn't want a dash. He sat down close by, his reward was a ringside seat, and watched the show: the white man writing, drinking, coughing, wiping the sweat from his face. Presently I gave him a swig of whisky; it went immediately to his head. One moment his lip was on the glass, the next he was swaying and giggling in senile tipsiness. He tried to smoke a cigarette, but the smoke got in his eyes. He was like a withered plant one has tried to revive with spirit; it begins immediately to open and flutter its petals, but a moment later the spirit has run its course and it is more dead than ever. In the middle of lunch the chief arrived again to intro-

duce his brother, a fourth lieutenant in the Liberian Frontier Force, through whose village we would pass next day. He was a young simple brutal man in a fur cap with a small metal Liberian flag on it. They had obviously come for whisky and I gave it them; it sent the chief back to his hut for the rest of the day.

He was quite right; there was nothing else to do but drink. The difficulty was to get drunk; the spirit ran out in sweat almost as quickly as one drank it. The race between the night and drunkenness became furious as darkness fell. For I still feared the rats: I wanted something to make me sleep; but drink was quite useless for that purpose and most of the night I lay awake listening to the vermin cascading down the walls, racing over the boxes. I had already learnt that one could not touch the earthen floor with naked feet without catching jiggers under the nails; now I learned that at night anything left outside a case would be eaten—by cockroaches or rats. They would eat anything: shirts, stockings, hair-brushes, the laces in one's shoes.

Rats

Rats indeed take some getting used to. There are said to be as many rats as human beings even in England in the large towns, but the life they lead is subterranean. Unless you go down into the sewers or haunt the huge rubbish dumps which lie beyond the waste building lots under a thin fume of smoke, you are unlikely to meet a rat. It needs an effort of imagination in Piccadilly Circus to realise that for

every passing person, there is a rat in the tunnels underneath.

They are shy creatures; even while I slept among them, and heard them round me all night, I never *saw* one until I arrived in Ganta, where they were bolder and didn't wait till dark. Flash a torch: they always avoided its beam; leave a lamp burning: and they played just as furiously in the shadow outside the range of light.*

I remembered the first live rat I ever saw. I had returned with my brother from a revue in Paris to a famous hotel on the left bank near the Luxembourg. It was about one o'clock in the morning; my brother went upstairs first; and lolloping behind him, like a small rabbit, went a rat. I could hardly believe my eyes as I followed them; it didn't go with the dapper lounge, the wealthy international guests. But I wasn't drunk; I could see quite distinctly the rough brown fur at its neck. I suppose one of the million or two rats in Paris was reconnoitring. Its appearance had a premeditated sinister air. I thought of the first Uhlans appearing at the end of a Belgian country road.

The next rat I saw was dead. I had taken a cottage in Gloucestershire and the country scared me. Something used to make a noise in the thatch every night, and I thought of rats: I knew the villagers went rattling along the hedge at the bottom of my garden. The rat-catcher, a rat-like man himself in old army breeches who was said by cruel village rumour to

* Perhaps town rats are bolder. In Freetown in 1942 I would lie awake under my mosquito-net and watch them scamper across my dressing table and swing upon my black-out curtains (1946).

have allowed his first wife to starve, came with his ferrets; they scrambled along the thatch, rearing at the chimney stack like tiny polar bears; one of them couldn't keep his footing and continually fell off until he had to be put back in the bag. There weren't any rats, the catcher said, and refused payment. He had a pride in his profession and would only be paid by results, at the rate of a shilling a rat. But that night there was a knock on the door. A village woman stood in the door and held out a dead rat, jumping with fleas. She said, "I thought maybe you might like to see a rat. We've caught twenty down the hedge," dangling the body under my lamp.

It is not, after all, unreasonable to fear a rat. The fear of moths, of birds and bats—this may be nerves; but the fear of the rat is rational. To quote Mr. Hans Zinsser, "It carries diseases of man and animals—plague, typhus, trichinella spiralis, rat-bite fever, infectious jaundice, possibly trench fever, probably foot-and-mouth disease and a form of equine 'influenza'. . . . They have nibbled at the ears and noses of infants in their cribs; starving rats once devoured a man who entered a disused coal-mine." It wasn't in the least comforting to remember that there are forty million rats in England; the thought of the one rat which the sister at Bolahun had found sniffing at her hair was enough to hinder sleep.

And lying awake and hearing the rats play among our boxes, I couldn't help remembering, too, the list of diseases I had read in England: leprosy, yaws, smallpox. . . . They were all, I felt certain, to be found in Duogobmai, and it was no comfort to know that leprosy was hardly at all contagious and that

none of these diseases could be transmitted by fleas in a rat's fur. One felt that even the dust in the cramped dirty town was poisonous, no less than fleas.

And yet all the time, below the fear and the irritation, one was aware of a curious lightness and freedom; one might drink, that was a temporary weakening; but one was happy all the same; one had crossed the boundary into country really strange; surely one had gone deep this time.

Buzie Country

If we seldom sank as low as Duogobmai we seldom rose as high as Nicoboozu, which we reached next day after an easy cheerful trek of only three hours. Alfred had gone home; he had decided that the journey was not going to be a holiday; and in his place Vande had taken a friend of Babu's, a Buzie man called Guawa. Guawa was an asset; he had the carriers singing before Duogobmai had slipped behind the trees. He sang and he danced, danced even when he carried a hammock or a load; I could hear his voice down the trail, proposing the line of an impromptu song which the carriers took up, repeated, carried on. These songs referred to their employers; their moods and their manners were held up to ridicule; a village when the carriers pressed through in full song would learn the whole story of their journey. Sometimes a villager would join in the chant, asking a question, and I could hear the question tossed along the line until it became part of the unending song and was answered.

At the village before Nicoboozu the fourth

lieutenant waited to greet us; he led us to his hut, and his brother brought a present of a large cockerel and a dozen eggs. The fourth lieutenant brought out his weapons, a long spear with a leather grip softened by fur and with a leather sheath, and a sword with goatskin at the hilt. He showed me his warrant as a fourth lieutenant dated 1918, and a letter from his commander recommending him for personal bravery and stating that, though he was completely illiterate and unable to learn the new drills, he was a good officer in peace and war. He said he had fought the Grebos and the Krus, and there was a young naïve brutality in his manner of touching his sword, a pride in killing and death.

Nicoboozu was a clean little town, the huts wide apart, and the chief was old, hospitable and incurious. He dashed us a chicken and a hamper of rice, saw that the hut we were to sleep in was swept, and then retired to his hammock and shade from the mid-day sun while we had a bath in a tin basin and the jiggers were cut out of our toes.

Nicoboozu was as favourable an example as we could find of a village touched by the Buzie culture. Here the women wore little silver arrows in their hair and twisted silver bracelets, beaten by the blacksmith out of old Napoleon coins brought from French Guinea, and heavy silver anklets; the men wore rings, primitive signet rings with a flattened side, and decorative beaded rings and rings twisted to match the bracelets. The weavers were busy, and every piece of craftsmanship we saw was light and unself-conscious. There was an air of happiness about the place which next day we did not find in Zigita.

Zigita is the principal town of the Buzie tribe, it is a town where even the commonest bush cutlass is beautiful, but it isn't happy. It is Buzie in another fashion, the fashion of witchcraft and fear.

The village women danced to us that evening in starlight to the music of rattles. It was not a lovely dance; they were not lovely dancers but emaciated old women slapping their pitted buttocks in a kind of Charleston; but they were cheerful and happy, and we were happy, too, as they slapped and rattled and laughed and pranced, and we drank warm boiled water with whisky and the juice of limes, and the timelessness, the irresponsibility, the freedom of Africa began to touch us at last.

It wasn't easy to analyse the fascination behind the dirt and disease, but it was more than a personal fantasy, satisfied more than a personal need. Different continents have made their call to different ages, and people at every period have tried to rationalise in terms of imperialism, gold or conquest their feeling for an untouched land, for a country "that hath yet her maidenhead, never sacked, turned, nor wrought, the face of the earth hath not been torn, nor the virtue and salt of the soil spent by manurance; the graves have not been opened for gold, the mines not broken with sledges, nor their images pulled down out of their temples."

The old women danced and were cheerful, with the sores on their breasts and the silver arrows in their hair. There were mines in Nigeria broken by sledges: over the border in Sierra Leone were other mines. Justice ruled on the north, the east and the west: here there was injustice, massacres, exaction, but the

forest stayed forest, it was hardly pitted at all by the little holes the white prospectors had dug, the steep paths to Zigita sparkled with mica, but the minerals remained where they were in the soil of the country, and the images had certainly not been pulled down out of the temples.

That Zigita proved, the Buzie town reached by forest paths so steep that I hardly had to bend to use my hands in climbing. The President might speak of building motor roads through the Republic: these paths proved what difficulties lay before him. He had forgotten or never trodden this way, as hard and rough, according to Sir Alfred Sharpe, as any in Africa, which leads to Zigita sprawling across a high plateau, surrounded by forests and higher hills, five and a half hours' trek from Nicoboozu. Zigita itself is nearly two thousand feet up, and to the north-west, Onagizi, a thimble of almost perpendicular rock, rises another thousand feet, the home of evil spirits. But all round Zigita are hills and forest; it is overlooked from every side but one, and on nights of storm the lightning runs along the top of the hills, circling it with green flame.

The Big Bush Devil

In Zigita it is quite easy to believe that there are men in Buzie country who can make lightning. The use of lightning is little more than a post-graduate course to be taken when the ordinary initiations of the bush school are over, just as the women may take poisoning as *their* post-graduate course. About six years ago the old blind chief of Zigita lost his wife.

She ran away to the hut of a younger man, and when the chief sent to him to claim the proper fine, they had gone. This flight, this failure to pay the customary fine, made the couple guilty, not their adultery. A year later the chief travelled down to Monrovia to a conference with President King. He heard that the young people were living in the town with their baby. He was a forbearing man and again he sent to them to demand that the fine be paid. When the young man refused, the chief, who was a member of the Lightning Society, made artificial lightning which struck the hut, killed the man and the woman, but left the baby, who lay in the bed between them, unharmed. This story is believed by everyone in Liberia, white and black. I heard it from several sources, and it never varied. The old chief I did not see, because he was away at Voinjema meeting the President.

A Liberian District Commissioner is stationed at Zigita: the compound lies up the slope of a hill above the town, above the long field of thatched and pointed huts like stooks of bound bean-stalks. The town chief, who brought to my hut in the compound a crowd of men with swords and daggers and jewellery for sale, seemed young and downtrodden. He was ordered about by the D.C.'s clerk (the D.C. was away at Voinjema), but if the D.C. had the chief well under this thumb, there was a higher, though more secret, authority than the Commissioner's: the Big Bush Devil, in Dr. Westermann's phrase the Grand Master of a Bush Society, whom it is death or blindness for an uninitiated native so much as to see and who must be distinguished from the devils we

had watched dancing in grotesque masks, the mere heads of the local bush schools. A new hut was being fenced in for him by the townsfolk as my carriers climbed the slope to the compound: this was a force ruling by terror and poison, which had already driven away one District Commissioner, the other side of the Buzie medal to that which now, as we sat in the verandah with the town chief and the clerk, so richly displayed itself.

The servants did the bargaining. Bracelets and daggers were sold for a few shillings apiece; a sword with a carved ivory hilt was bought from a fat man with the authoritative air of an Eastern eunuch for eight shillings. He lost his temper with Laminah, who, he said, was spoiling the market. He had a few words of English; he said 'yes'm' and 'no'm'; there was something servile and baleful in his manner. He was one of the richest men in the town. I met him in my stroll that evening and he asked to have a picture taken of him. "Which is your hut?" I said. "I'll take you in front of it."

"That my hut," the fat man said, pointing past a black bull. "Yes'm. And that. And that. And that. Yes'm. And that," marking out half the town with his plump finger. Next day, the terrified Laminah, who remembered how his bargaining had angered the stranger, learnt that he was the headman of the devil.

The sales continued until late: all the finest swords and spears were brought last by men who slipped quietly in behind the lowered reed screens which at mosquito-time made the verandah into a little private room. One owner, at the chief's command, unwillingly brought a lovely sword in a worked leather

sheath, with a hilt of ivory and brass. He didn't want to sell; he loved the sword; it had been his father's. It was pathetic to watch the struggle in his mind between his love for it and the wealth he was offered. I raised my bid to twenty-two shillings and the man nearly gave way. That sum of money would have fed him, and fed him well, for more than three months. He lifted up the screen and ran from temptation, back down the hill into the village, carrying the sword. The carriers laughed at him as they lay sprawling in the verandah.

For we led a patriarchal life on trek. Only the places in which we slept were free from intrusion. If the hut had a verandah or a room to eat in, it belonged to the carriers too. They sat around, on the floor, in the hammocks; they slept in corners. It was assumed that I would always be glad to see them there, to attend to their wants even in the middle of a meal, giving them iodine or Epsom salts. At Zigita a leprous man from the town came, with the sellers, to be healed, standing dumbly, holding out his rotting hands. Passive misery had been stamped on his face for a long while, but he had seen the carriers take medicine from me and one could tell that behind the misery a spark of belief had been struck in miracles. It was no good destroying hope and admitting there was nothing I could do. I gave him a few tablets of boric acid to dissolve and bathe his hands with.

At half-past six when the leper and the men with swords to sell had all gone home, the mosquito-screen was lifted and a stranger slipped in. We were drinking whisky and lime; the hurricane lamp was turned low to save oil; we couldn't understand what the man

wanted when he spoke urgently to us from the shadows. We called Mark to translate. It was a command from the devil in the town that no one should go outside; no one must even look through a window, for the devil proposed to leave his hut. The servants came in from the cookhouse and listened; the man slipped away again into the dark and left them scared. I tried to sound the servants; it was disquieting to see how grave and frightened Laminah had become, although the longest march never stilled his tongue for long. He stood there silent and gloomy in his shorts, his little white waiter's jacket which the forest had torn, his woollen cap with the red bobble. He believed, one could not doubt it, that if we so much as saw the devil through a window we would go blind. The warning reached the carriers who were gathered in the cookhouse, and suddenly all the voices were turned low like lamp flames. One could hear the silence welling up the hill from Zigita into the compound. I looked from under the mosquito-screen; the compound was quite empty; the sentry who usually guarded the gateway had disappeared; the screens were down in the clerk's house and the windows shuttered.

I said: "But if we go outside, do you really think that anything . . . ?"

They watched me carefully, trying to make out if I were serious. Mark was a Christian boy, he wouldn't answer directly, he was ashamed of his fear, but he said he thought we oughtn't to go. Amedoo broke in excitedly with a story it was difficult to follow about what had happened in 1923 at dinner one night at a District Commissioner's in Sierra Leone: "The D.C.

he sit here, his wife she sat there, Mr. Trout he sat here, Mrs. Trout she sat there and the devil passed through." He said that if we went and saw the devil, the devil would put a medicine on the town and there would be no white man after we had gone with better medicine. The boys went into the two rooms and drew the mosquito-screens over the windows; after they had cleared dinner they sat with the carriers in the cookhouse with the blinds pulled down; we could see the lamp shining on the floor through the slats and the shadows of the silent figures.

But the needs of the body had to be satisfied, and taking our electric torches we went out through the compound to the edge of the forest. The town of over two thousand inhabitants might have been deserted; the pale sickle of a new moon, a sky luminous with stars, circle after circle of shuttered huts. The place had an eerie air after Nicoboozu and Duogobmai, where music and dancing, laughter and cries went on till midnight, for it was not yet nine. But as we returned up the path out of the forest and flashed our torches on the town, we lit up two human figures who were standing silently outside the devil's hut. Perhaps the devil had set a watch on Zigita to see who moved or peeped, because for some time after we returned to the rest-house we could hear feet moving in the compound, lightly stirring in the dust outside. As we undressed the devil's music began in Zigita, the pulse of a drum. We turned out the lamps and lifted the screen from the window which faced the town, but there was nothing to be seen from the direction of the devil's hut; no lights moved. "When once," Saki wrote, "you have taken the Impossible

into your calculations its possibilities become practically limitless." We had the creeps that night; there were no doors and anyone could slip into the house under the mosquito-screens. I very nearly took the automatic out of the money-box to load it; only self-consciousness prevented me.

I had expected the atmosphere in the morning to clear. This was the day of rest which the carriers had looked forward to, but they showed no sign of enjoying it. They lingered in the rest-house, avoided the town. Mark said it was a bad place where they fought with poison and not swords, and I remembered uneasily how simple it would be for the devil to poison the carriers' food and teach the sceptical whites a lesson. Thunder kept wandering along the hills; two carriers complained of their heads and one of his belly, and I sent off a messenger to the Lutheran mission at Zorzor warning them of our coming next day, although I had meant to stay another day at Zigita. All the morning the building of the fence round the new hut went on, a line of women carrying pails of water up and down the hill from the river to loosen the soil. The noise was like that of a distant football match; every now and then there were screams of delight as if a try had been scored. Once the headman arrived on the verandah and asked for some oil, and if I had not stopped him, Laminah would have given him the greater part of our supply.

Again a warning was brought to the compound that the devil was leaving his hut. After the drums had sounded, no one was to go outside. The fat baleful man appeared with a lot of trash to sell, and I, not knowing then who he was, chaffed him at the gate

way of the compound. He had with him a little old man with a white goatee beard who wanted us to buy some crude leather pouch. 'Yes'm,' and 'No'm,' the fat man said at intervals. "And this devil," I said, "why can't I see him?" He laughed evasively and Laminah plucked at my sleeve. He knew who the fat man was and he was scared. The fat man turned and saw him. He became boisterously funny, but without any humour showing in his little sunk eyes. He said, "You want to see devil, eh?" gripping Laminah's arm, and he began to talk to him in his own tongue.

When Laminah got away he was stammering with his fear. The fat man, he said, was the devil's headman and the old man with the goatee beard his medicine man. The headman had frightened him badly in revenge for his bargaining over the sword; he had told him that he would be carried away into the bush for seven years and forcibly initiated into the Bush Society. The thunder rumbled round the hills and the clouds broke up. Amedoo joined us. He said, "England good place. You have one God and no devils: I have one God too but plenty devils." He was a Mohammedan. He began all over again the story about the English D.C. He wanted to prove that it wasn't safe to laugh in private at a Big Bush Devil. They could make themselves invisible: they could hear everything.

Then the rain came washing down, a vertical wall of water, while the thunder rumbled. We ran for shelter. Mark met us on the verandah, anxious to impress us, too, with how bad a place it was. The D.C., Amedoo began to tell us all over again, had been having dinner. "Mrs. D.C. sat here, Mr. Trout

there." The D.C. had laughed and said that he would like to see the devil, and immediately the devil had passed invisibly through the dinner-table splitting it in half. Through a window we could see a man standing outside the devil's hut in the pouring rain fanning the thunderstorm away with a switch of elephant hair, fanning it away from the devil's hut towards the compound and the hills. He stood there for more than two hours in the rain, fanning.

The storm continued all the evening and well into the night. It certainly kept away from Zigita; the hills and the huts leapt up in green light; the thunder travelled all the way along the rim, the lightning screwing down into the forest. There was no sound from the devil's hut. The stage was magnificently set for a supernatural act. I had promised the boys we would not look outside, but we kept watch on the hut through a crack in the shutter. It leapt and receded before the green flames; something should have happened to crown the wild night, but nothing did. The devil never stirred and the great natural preparation went on too long without a climax; the storm became a bore.

That night the rats came leaping into my room like large cats; they knocked things over; they made too much noise for me to sleep, though they always evaded the eye of the torch. A tin went crashing over; once I could have sworn that the lamp itself had gone. But curiously, when daylight came, nothing was out of order; even the biscuit-tin I had heard fall was in its usual place.

There was certainly something bad about Zigita. I never felt quite well again until I reached the Coast.

It was not that I believed in the devil's power so much as in the power of my own mind. The suggestion of malice and evil here was so great that I could imagine it influencing my mind until I half believed, and a half-belief can be strong enough to affect the health.

So in a way I was just as glad to leave Zigita as the carriers were. They broke into song as soon as they got beyond its boundaries, and made fast time on the wide treeless track south to Zorzor. We couldn't see twenty yards ahead at first because of the deep wet fog which dropped softly round us, but when the sun had sucked it up, we experienced the real ferocity of Africa on the shadeless road. It staggered and sickened me even through a sun-helmet. Once a beautiful little green snake moved across the path, upright, without hurry, bearing her bust proudly forward into the grasses like a hostess painted by Sargent, poisonous with gentility, a Fabergé jewel.

At lunch in the only shade the wide gorge provided the messenger arrived from Zorzor with a note to tell me that I could have a house in the compound of the Lutheran mission.

Kindness in a Corner

I had expected something better of a mission than this parched playground on a hill-top opposite Zorzor: the deserted houses, nobody about, the dusty plants, and at last the fat American woman trailing forward through the afternoon heat in a green-flowered dress, the pattern tightly expanded across the hips, a white topee. She whined at us dismally that this was the house: the dusty rambling shut-

tered house stuffy with the smell of vermin, torn mosquito-wire across the windows. She couldn't find the keys and gazing through the windows I could see stacks of missionary literature on wobbly tables and files of broken filters against the peeling walls. "You see, I'm all alone here," the American woman wailed, trailing round the building looking for the keys, but she checked herself, when she had taken another look at my dirty shorts, my dirty face and unshaven skin, and when a little later I insisted, "Are you really quite alone?" she wouldn't answer the question, scared, I suppose, for her goods and her honour.

If Duogobmai was the dirtiest place in the Republic, Zorzor was the most desolate. It hadn't been left to itself; the whites had intruded, had not advanced, had simply stuck and withered there, leaving their pile of papers, relics of a religious impulse, sentimental, naïve, destined to failure. Mrs. Croup's husband had been drowned at Monrovia: the other man in the mission had gone off his head. Mrs. Croup had been alone now for six months. I heard her voice whining away across the compound, as I hypocritically called after her some expression of my pleasure at sleeping in a house after the native huts, "Well, I guess we try to keep it free of bugs."

But she was a kind woman, and her whine had its excuse. I found next day that I was whining too. It was the heat. One hadn't the energy to finish forming words; the voice trailed out, like bad handwriting, after the first syllable. She was kind, courageous, practical and a little bizarre. She sold me a cracked lamp from the mission stores at a great deal more than its value, and she kept a black baby in her house and a

cobra in her garden. The cobra she fed with a live chicken every day; she had always meant to watch it as it swallowed the chicken, but somehow, though she guessed it would be interesting, she had never thought to watch through the lid of the hutch at the right time. She said enigmatically, "I'd have sent you an invite to dinner, but I'm going home in six months," an excuse which became even more difficult to understand when later in the evening, learning that we were leaving next day, she said: "Oh, if I'd known you were going that soon, I'd have sent you an invite."

That evening I had a conference at her house. She had advised me to cut across the corner of French Guinea to Ganta, making my first stay at Bamakama. As usual the carriers said it was too far. So I took Amah down to her, as the spokesmen of the men, and Vande slid in at the door with a dour silent carrier who always trailed at his heels. They sat on stools and the baby crawled about their feet and Mrs. Croup stoked up a roaring fire in the tiny stuffy tropic room lined with photographs in Oxford frames.

But as Mrs. Croup talked, I became more and more doubtful whether she really knew anything about the route. She always travelled in a hammock specially made to carry her weight, with eighteen hammock-carriers. She drove them hard: a ten-hour trek was nothing to her. She sent out for a man who knew the route, but he had never been farther than Bamakama and then he had taken two days over the journey; he believed there was a short way by Jbaiay, but he wasn't sure whether it was passable, whether the chiefs had mended the bridges since the last rains.

I could see the carriers' doubts growing; they were thinking that again I was going to force them into too long a trek. So I told them that we would go next day to Jbaiay and there discover the road to Bamakama; if it was too far we would spend the night at Jbaiay. They assented to the plan with suspicious alacrity. . . .

There were no rats that night: only cockroaches, ready to eat anything available. They lay there, while the light was on, flattened like large blood blisters against the wall, but when it was extinguished they flashed faster than lizards on the hunt. Sir Harry Johnston, who knew only the coast districts of Liberia, never penetrating, I believe, much farther inland than his rubber plantation at Mount Barclay outside Monrovia, speaks of these cockroaches as "obviously harboured and bred in the heaps of refuse which accumulate" in the Americo-Liberian settlements. But really they can be found everywhere in the Republic. "These insects," he wrote, "do not hesitate at night to attack human beings who are asleep. They creep to the corners of the mouth of the sleeping person to suck the saliva. They eat the toe-nails down to the quick, and above all, they gnaw at any sore place or ulcer on the skin. . . . Dr. Büttikofer relates that he only saved his body from attack at one time by placing bowls of rice and sugar in his bedroom as a counter-attraction. . . . The present writer has been attacked in a somewhat similar way, but on board dirty and uncomfortable steamers on the West Coast a good many years ago. In the bunks of these steamers cockroaches swarmed, and there were of course no mosquito curtains to

shield the unfortunate passenger, who would wake in the dead of night, in black darkness, to find two or three large cockroaches clinging to his lips."

This, as I grew more tired and my health a little failed, seemed to be what I would chiefly remember as Africa: cockroaches eating our clothes, rats on the floor, dust in the throat, jiggers under the nails, ants fastening on the flesh. But in retrospect even the cockroaches seem only the badge of an unconquered virginity, "never sacked, turned, nor wrought." In Sierra Leone, in the bright electric Hill Station, one was conscious under the fans beside the iced drinks of how the land had been subdued; but even in the capital town of Liberia one was aware only of a settlement, a very chancy settlement that might be wiped out at any time by yellow fever. White and black, they were living here for a short while on the surface of the land, but Africa had the last say, and it said it in the form of rats and ants, of the forest swallowing up the little pits the Dutch prospectors had made and abandoned. There is not so much virginity in the world that one can afford not to love it when one finds it.

CHAPTER FOUR

BLACK MONTPARNASSE

The Carriers' Strike

NEXT morning we entered France: so the colony was known among the natives of the Republic. One of

the men reported sick before we started, was paid off and left behind. The number of carriers had now almost reached a minimum. My cousin used a hammock and needed four carriers, but I reduced my hammock-men to three: I hadn't used the hammock yet and unless I went sick I saw no reason why I should ever need to use it.

The country was stamped as French from the first village we stayed in, which was neither Bamakama nor Jbaiay as I had intended: French in its commercial sense, in its baits which I should have believed to be intended for tourists, if there had been any hope of tourists. It was astonishing what a difference the invisible boundary made. You could not have mistaken this land for Liberia. Tourists would have been quite at home here among the round huts and the scarlet fezzes of the Mandingo traders. For these traders were indistinguishable, except that their dignity was less tarnished, from the men who sell carpets in the Dôme and the Rotonde. The only difference was we had followed them home. It was as if we had shadowed them all the way from the Boule Miche, sitting in third-class carriages, travelling steerage, riding up the long way from Konakry on horse-back.

In 'France' the trouble with the carriers came to a head. Their complaints, the phrase 'too far', 'too far', had got on my nerves. To be deserted altogether, I began to think, might be preferable to this recurrent bickering, this pressure to go more slowly than I could afford. The trouble was I did not know the extent of my authority and I did not know which of them I could trust. Vande I suspected; the head-

man was a cheerful rogue with his pipe and his cloth cap and his rattle; but it sometimes seemed to me that he let the carriers have their own way too often. I trusted Amah, because Amah was unpopular with the other men; I trusted Babu, the Buzie, and his friend Guawa; I thought I could trust my hammock-man, Kolieva, who went ahead with me on each day's march.

But it was Kolieva who led me effectually astray the first day in France. We took the wrong path from the first: the carriers had evidently talked in Zorzor with the inhabitants and decided that the way to Bamakama by Jbaiay was too long and rough. No one ever knew the name of the town we reached about two hours later, across the upper reach of the St. Paul. It sounded like Koinya. It was distinguished from the Liberian villages by a kind of town-planning. The huts of the chief and his wives were enclosed by a high wall in the centre, round which the town circled. The whole place was rather like an encampment of traders on the road.

When Amah arrived he interpreted what the chief had to say: that Bamakama was a full day's trek away and that he was uncertain whether the paths between had been cleared or the bridges opened after the last rains. He was a man of great dignity, a little below the average Mandingo height with a black beard and a scarlet fez and a country robe and that Semitic expression in the dark eyes above the hooked nose of being open to the commercial chance. The men in the village had their hair curiously cut into patterns and tufts: I had seen nothing of the kind in Liberia. Their heads were often completely shaved

except for two tufts, at the crown and the nape; they looked like poodles, and a poodle of course is a French dog. The women in French Guinea, too, lived up to the standard of a country which provides the handsomest whores and the most elegant brothels; their hair was gummed into complicated ringlets like watch-springs round the ears, they were sometimes painted on the face with blue and ochre, as well as the usual white stripes, and this gave them the thick rather unfinished look of a modern portrait.

It was no good going on after what the chief had said. He promised a guide for the next day and had the only square hut in the village swept out. This was another peculiarity of the French colony, that every town had to supply a rest-house for travellers. The idea would have been a better one if travellers had been more frequent, but these rest-houses (usually, though not in Koinya, a little outside the towns in a compound of their own) had almost always fallen to decay with spiders building across the doors, the thatch dropped in and the cookhouse a ruin over the ashes of old fires. In Koinya, perhaps, the inhabitants were far enough from the route of any French Commissioner to use the rest-house themselves, with the result that it was clean and well-cared for.

No sooner were we settled in the hut than trade began. Everything was for sale. There was no such thing as dashing here. The dash, though it has become a convenient method of extorting money, must have originated in a gesture of courtesy and hospitality, in a generosity rather alien to the modern Mandingo mind. All the junk of civilisation had

been washed up in the village like the last line of seaweed on a beach. One could get porcelain pans and pails, knives crudely decorated with silver alloy and brass to catch a stranger's jackdaw eye; even the common curved cutlass for hacking a path through the bush was offered gaudily got up, its handle covered with the alloy from Napoleonic coins, the blade as blunt as wood. It must have been the pure spirit of commerce which led them to manufacture these objects (they could not have encountered white tourists here twice in ten years), or perhaps this was the obscure factory from which the gimcrackery on sale in Konakry and Dakar, in Paris itself, came; we had stumbled on an industrial centre in the furthest corner of one of the least known of the French colonies. Perhaps even the cannibals on the Ivory Coast were now chiefly occupied in manufacturing baits for tourists.

The carriers had only marched for half a day, but they had eaten before they left Zorzor and there was trouble in the air. They kept sulkily apart from my hut, all except Babu and Amah, talking in high angry voices. I was no longer a patriarch among my retainers; I was the unjust employer; there was bad blood somewhere which had to be let out. It worked a little on the nerves not knowing what complaint they would make or when they would bring it me; and the worst of it was that I could not lose my temper, I must remain cheerful and good-humoured, I had to laugh at them however much I wanted to curse them.

In the afternoon I lay down but I couldn't sleep. A little while before sundown, when I was sponging

myself in my tin bath, Amedoo came into the hut. He said, "The labourers say they want more money. Massa say no." He was the perfect manservant; he advised me how to meet a mutiny with the calmness and firmness of Jeeves advising Bertie Wooster on the choice of a tie. But it was sometimes a strain to live up to him: his loyalty, his honesty and his complete reliability demanded so much in return: a master, too, who was reliable as he understood reliability, in the imperial manner. He had lived with District Commissioners; he completely failed to understand any other than the official attitude of a man to his carriers. It was a relief to me when in the last week of the trek even Amedoo's morale began to weaken.

I lingered as long as I could in my bath; it was embarrassing to know that Amedoo would judge me by my conduct now; it would have been so disgracefully easy to have given way. For, after all, the carriers were disgracefully underpaid. At last I had to go outside, sit down, pretend to write my diary. I was aware of them watching me, judging the moment to strike. I felt like a fly on a wall and they held the whisk. Then Kolieva came forward, and about fifteen carriers drifted up in a close group behind him. I hadn't expected Kolieva to be one of them. He was embarrassed and that helped me; he was exaggeratedly sullen and falsely dignified, his heavy lip drooped, he beat at his toes with a stick and spoke thickly. He was the only one of the mutineers who knew a few words of English. It occurred to me as I counted the number of the strikers that I could never reach my objective without them, paying at

every town for new carriers at the Government rate. If they remained firm and took their pay and left us, we should have to cut straight through the forest towards Monrovia. I wasn't sure that my money would last even then. If they had only known it, they had all the aces in their hand.

Kolieva said they wanted to talk to me. They wanted more money. I pretended not to understand him. I said I was willing to lend anyone a little money on his wages. Vande had already borrowed sixpence at Zigita. How much would they like? Kolieva grew more embarrassed; he said the Government wage for a carrier was a shilling a day. He was quite right of course; the proper wage was a shilling, though I believe it was legal to contract over a period at a smaller rate, and actually no one in Liberia, except a few unfortunate travellers taking carriers from town to town, ever pays the proper wage. Certainly not Government officials, who can generally get carriers for no payment at all.

I said that the Government wage didn't include food, and I was paying for their food. They could not tell that their food only came to about twopence a head; but they stood in a surly circle, not really listening to anything. It was no good arguing the merits of the case. Besides, the merits were all on their side. I was exploiting them like all their other masters, and it would have been no comfort to them to know that I could not afford not to exploit them and that I was a little ashamed of it. I pretended to be puzzled, to understand nothing of what they meant; they had contracted . . . I told somebody to fetch Vande and when he came I asked him what it was they were

arguing about; I had understood from him that they had agreed to work for three shillings a week.

Then I bluffed. There was nothing else to do. They had me on the spot. Babu and Amah were on my side and of course my servants; Vande, too, I thought, from the way he spoke to them, though I couldn't understand a word of Bande. I said, "Tell them they can go home. I'll give them their pay, but they won't get any dash, I'll take new carriers here." He talked to them, they shouted things at him, after what seemed a long while he smiled. He said, "They no want to go." It was the moment to strike harder. Kolieva seemed to be the ringleader; I told him to go. I'd pay him off. I thought to myself all the while: if I can keep them together for a fortnight more they will be in a country as strange to them as to me; they won't want to leave. There was a tribe, about a week ahead, which was still supposed to practise cannibalism on strangers; they wouldn't want to be paid off there. But I had won: Kolieva explained it was all a mistake, grinning with shame; and a moment later they were laughing and joking as if there had been no disagreement; they were like children who have tried to get an extra holiday but bear no grudge because they have never really believed they would succeed. But the dispute had let out most of the bad blood; for two more days there were to be continual arguments, which wore my temper to threads, and then quite suddenly they began to work together happily and smoothly.

Vande asked whether they could kill the kid I had been given in Kpangblamai, and it seemed the right moment for conciliation. I said 'yes,' not expecting

the immediate slaughter there in front of the hut: the little kid held down on the ground by its legs like a crucified child, the knife across the throat and the screams through the flow of blood. The kid took a long time dying, the blood welling out across the earth, gathering in pools on the baked unporous ground, as the light went and someone in the chief's enclosure began to shake a rattle. And it was good to know that one had not been deserted.

Bamakama

The next day wasn't so good. We were out on the trail with a guide from Koinya by seven, but the paths were very rough for the carriers, and they and my cousin fell a long way behind. There was a multiplicity of little paths and the country was slowly changing from the Liberian hills and forest to a plateau covered with tall elephant grass twice the height of a man, a plateau which I suppose stretches northward to what Mungo Park called the Mountains of Kong, and then on again to the Niger. On one of these tiny paths I saw the only horse, with the exception of the bony mare in Freetown, I saw in West Africa; an old Mandingo with a white beard and a turban sat it and watched us go by through the grass. A boy carried all their gear upon his head. He may have come from very far away, perhaps from the Sahara.

After three and a half hours' march we reached the St. Paul River again, or the Diani as this upper reach is called. On either side the forest followed it, a slow shadowed river, seventy yards across, under

the huge trees. It was only at the watersides that nature was ever beautiful: away from the rivers it was too dry and shrivelled and lifeless for beauty. But here there was faint movement, depth and gleam: refreshment, too, in the thought that the great slow stream was moving down to *our* destination, though by a quicker route, and would come out two hundred miles or so farther, past the great central forest, into the flats and mangrove swamps of Monrovia.

A ferry took us to the other side, a raft built of the trunks of trees lashed together and pulled across on a creeper rope. Amedoo was with me and Amah and about ten of the carriers; the others were somewhere behind with my cousin. After half an hour I was anxious, but my anxiety was small compared with Amedoo's. He had been ordered in Sierra Leone by Daddy to take care of us and never to show his face again in Freetown without us, and the responsibility weighed on him. He walked restlessly up and down the high bank above the river, shouting, but the sound died out a few yards away among the trees. There was nothing we could do if they had lost their way, and my cousin's lot really would have been happier than mine. My cousin had Laminah and the cook and Vande, the beds and mosquito-nets, and most of the food and more than half the carriers. I tried to make up my mind what I should do; it would be no use chasing each other all over French Guinea. I decided to go on, just as my cousin, I learnt later, had decided to go back.

But at last when I was on the point of giving the order to march, for fear we should be caught by

darkness in the bush, an answer *did* come, from between the big trees, from across the water, and presently a tired angry band rejoined us. Among the many paths which had to be closed with sprays, one had been left open and they had taken it. The path had narrowed into nearly nothing at all, but they went on, Laminah cutting a way for them with the sword he wore, until they reached a closed wall of greenery and knew they were lost. In such densely overgrown country it was easy enough to be lost completely within a mile of a village and for all they knew they might be ten miles from any other human beings. If it had not been for the river I should have gone straight on to Bamakama without knowing that they were lost, and if Laminah had not found a man who guided them to the St. Paul, a piece of luck they couldn't have expected when once they had strayed off the main path, we should have been permanently separated, for my cousin had no idea of the route I intended to follow the other side of the St. Paul.

Another four hours' marching along narrow winding trails through thick elephant grass brought us to Bamakama. Here there was a rest-house for travellers outside the village in a small rotting compound, but it was so long since any white man had used it that it was in a horrible state of decay, the hut was full of bugs, and suddenly as we drank our tea an army of flies descended on the compound, settling all over our faces and the food. The monkey sat in a corner moaning like a child, and as the sun declined and the flies left us, the cockchafers came, detonating against the wall. A rat had died under the floor, and the smell of decay settled over the compound. This

was the second place where there was nothing to do but get drunk. We looked across the wall with envy towards the airy village. We were enveloped like with the dead rat and the cockroach.

And again there was the incident. One night it was the water-carriers who caused the trouble. The water for our washing and for the filter had to be carried up every day from the nearest stream in basins. Kolieva headed a party of carriers. I couldn't make out clearly what it was about. A tribal dispute seemed to have split the carriers into hostile groups. They complained, I think, that Amah, the second headman, favoured the Bande carriers; they didn't do their share of the water-carrying. They asked that Amah should cease to be second headman. The fight went on a long while and I was glad to be a little drunk. But I slept badly; what Daddy had told me in Sierra Leone came back now when my nerves were tired with the marches and the squabble. I imagined all night that leeches were falling on my face. It was really the plaster ceiling of the pretentious rest-house which the rats were demolishing. I was too drunk to remember that the mosquito-net protected me.

Galaye

The smell of the dead rat, the cockroaches which had got at our clothes and eaten them into holes, drove us away early. I was anxious above everything to get to Ganta. Mrs. Croup had spoken of it as three days away, but the chief at Bamakama seemed to think it was at least another three days off. It seemed to recede rather than approach; nobody at Bamakama

really knew the way, because Ganta was in Liberia, another country, and though the Mandingo traders knew the north boundaries, their country stretching from the Coast and Paris, across desert and savanna, the tribesman has seldom moved more than a day's march from his town. The boundaries between country and country, as between tribe and tribe, might be no more than a tiny stream the carriers waded through beneath a shower of butterflies, but they could not have been more definite if all the European display of barbed wire and Customs posts had been visible on either bank.

The chief strapped on a sword and acted as guide. I was glad that he set so smart a pace: if we were ever to reach Ganta, I thought, the men had got to be raced through the villages between. I had promised them a short march of three hours; but I was afraid my temper would give way altogether if I had to argue them on at every village. So we raced ahead, the chief and I and Kolieva, and left my cousin and the men to follow; I knew the carriers hadn't the resolution to stop behind without me.

It took exactly three hours to get to Galaye, a populous little town with the remains of old mud walls at the back like pieces of abandoned scenery. The rest-house here was in such a state of decay that I wouldn't use it and chose a hut in the village instead. It was a hospitable place; few of the younger people had seen a white face before and they stood all day in the doorway. There was nothing you could do without their noticing it; to draw a handkerchief from the pocket caused a craning of necks. It worked

a little on the nerves, this constant stare; but you had to recognise the superiority of their attitude over the white man's to something strange. We were as good as a circus; they had no wish to stuff us or skin us or put us in cages. The carriers, after a more dispute over the water-carrying, were cheerful, but I knew better by now than to expect their happiness to last. Their mood changed more rapidly than April weather. They, too, were appreciating something genuinely Gallic, for the girls of Galaye had an air of greater freedom towards strangers than I saw in any other tribe: one girl in particular who, when dark fell and the drums and harps were taken out, joined in the carriers' dances, a stamping and thrusting out of the elbows and buttocks, a caricature of sexuality. When they approved of a dancer, the others crowded round and stroked his arms and forehead, a curious intimate tactile applause.

The dancing went on for hours in a close hot circle before our hut. The moon was half full, and the increasing light worked on their spirits. This was one of the revelations of Africa, the deadness of what we think of as alive, the deadness of nature, the trees and shrubs and flowers, the vitality of what we think of as dead, the cold lunar craters. The carriers were aware of the moon with an intimacy from which we were excluded. At Galaye it was already moving in their blood, so that even Amedoo burst into the circle and danced with a sudden wild lapse from dignity. But the most grotesque of the dancers was a moron dwarf. They dropped him into the ring with a couple of piccaninnies of three years old who were as tall as he, and he swayed a great inflated head, like a

blister a pin would burst, to the beat of the rattle, and then howled and wept to be released.

I lay in bed while the music went on and held Burton against the mosquito-net to let the lamplight shine through on the page of cheap print. The cover was already going damp, as if the book had been left out in the dew. The word *nigra* caught my eye, as I listened to the feet stamping and the calls I couldn't understand. I suddenly felt, reading the lines of Calpurnius Graecus, the irresistible tug of the familiar, a longing for flowers and dew and scent. It was hard to believe they existed in the same world and that there were emotions of tenderness and regret that couldn't be expressed with a harp, a drum and a rattle, buttocks and black teats.

*Te sine, vae misero mihi, lilia nigra videntur,
Pallentesque rosae, nec dulce rubens hyacinthus,
Nullos nec myrtus nec laurus spirat odores.*

I put the light out and listened to the moonlit tumult, but when it ceased and the villagers crept into their huts and put up the doors, there was such a rush of rats down the walls that I switched on my torch and saw the shadows racing down. But I had left my door open and they didn't stay. I had the night to myself.

The Dead Forest

The next day was the eleventh of the trek, and we turned back into the great forest with very little idea of where we should spend the next night, except that

I was determined it should be at least fifteen miles towards the vanishing Ganta. Examining my diary I find the first expression of a weariness which was more mental than physical. Ganta, which I had thought was two days away from Zorzor, seemed to be receding. I had long given up thinking in terms of hours, but I still clung to time in the sense of darkness and daylight, not admitting yet that to be happy in Africa one must cease to count even the days and weeks and months.

The chief at Galaye told me that Ganta was still three days away, and only after Ganta would we begin to head south. Every march took us farther from the coast.

It was not that the villages were ever dull to me, and only here in French Guinea were their simplicity and hospitality a little tarnished by the touch of white rule, but the rising in the dark, the hurried breakfast, the seven hours of tramping along narrow paths through the hot-house forest with no view to either side and only occasional glimpses of sky above, this routine became almost unbearable. I was usually alone with a carrier or a guide who couldn't speak English, for Mark and Amedoo could not keep my pace, and I had to try in vain to occupy the mind, to think of things to think about. I would calculate: I can think of this place or that person for so many hundred steps, and I would have a sense of triumph when the thought lasted me for a few dozen steps further than I had hoped. But usually it was the other way; the image or the idea lost interest a long while before I had taken the hundred paces. And this succession of thoughts had to be kept up for six or

seven hours on end. I remember for what a long time I was able to think of fruit salts, for far longer and with more longing than I thought of beer or iced drinks. I suppose my digestion was suffering from the tinned foods, rough rice; the dry tough African chickens, and about five eggs a day. For the only way to economise our tinned supplies, which threatened to run short, was to eat off the country, rice, eggs and chicken, for meal after meal.

If the forest had been full of dangerous life, the day's marches would have been more supportable. A few monkeys, a snake or two, the sound of heavy birds creaking invisibly overhead, and ants, ants everywhere, this was all the life in the dead forest. The word 'forest' to me had always conveyed a sense of wildness and beauty, of an active natural force, but this forest was simply a green wilderness, and not even so very green. We passed on twelve-inch paths through an endless back garden of tangled weeds; they didn't seem to be growing round us so much as dying; there was no view, no change of scene, nothing to distract the eyes, and even if there had been, we couldn't have enjoyed the sight, for the eyes had to be kept on the ground all the way, to avoid the roots and boulders. It was a relief, a distraction, when a stream broke the path. A carrier would horse one across, for it was dangerous to wet the feet in the tiniest shallow stream because of guinea-worm which the Mandingo traders had brought down from the Sahara. The smell of the carriers had long ceased to be noticeable: I suppose our own smell by that time was bad enough, for fear of the same worm prevented us bathing as the carriers did in the rivers. The

guinea-worm makes its way through any sore in the foot, going up as far as the knee. When the foot is afterwards put in water the worm spews its eggs into the water through the sore. The only way to deal with it in the absence of a doctor is to find its end like a thread of cotton and wind it out in a long unbroken length round a match-stick. If the worm breaks, the leg may fester.

It was little wonder, then, that the senses were dulled and registered only acute boredom. I suppose there was some beauty in the forest, but the eye had long ceased to be æsthetic. The great swallow-tailed butterflies which rose in clouds round our waists at the stream sides seemed no more worth watching than the black ants which fastened on the flesh.

Perhaps the Liberian forest is peculiar in Africa for the quality of deadness, for other writers more often complain in *their* parts of Africa of the noise and savagery of the jungle. M. Céline is an example. "The forest is only waiting for this signal [the sunset] to start to shake, whistle and moan in all its depths, like some huge, barbarous, unlighted railway station. . . ." How we would have welcomed the moans and whistles of that station. You can grow intimate with almost any *living* thing, transfer to it your own emotion of tenderness, nostalgia, regret, so that often of a relationship one remembers the scene with the most affection. A particular line of hedge in a Midland county, a drift of leaves in a particular wood: it is only human to imagine that we receive back from these the feeling someone left with them. But no one had ever transferred to *this* forest any

human emotion at all. Like the shell of a house on a bankrupt housing estate it had never been lived in.

That poem of A. E. Housman's which begins

Tell me not here, it needs not saying,
What tune the enchantress plays
In aftermaths of soft September
Or under blanching mays.
For she and I were long acquainted
And I knew all her ways

had a curious fascination for me during those weeks; it was like a succession of pleasant sounds in a foreign language; it represented the huge difference between this Nature and what I had previously know. I used to reserve it as a last resort for when I could think of nothing else to think about and recite it very slowly to myself, wondering whether I had covered a hundred yards between the first and the last verse.

The poem had ceased to mean anything; it was impossible here to think of Nature in such terms of enchantment and nostalgia; it would have been like cherishing a dead weed in a pot, a sign of mental derangement

And full of shade the pillared forest
Would murmur and be mine. . . .

So Housman wrote, sharing the feeling of Wordsworth and many English Nature poets, that Nature was something alive which could be possessed as

one possesses a friend or a lover, but this forest had never belonged in that way to anyone. Perhaps it was even wrong to think of it as dead, for it had never been alive.

But it was only fair, I suppose, that the moments of extraordinary happiness, the sense that one was nearer than one had ever been to the racial source, to satisfying the desire for an instinctive way of life, the sense of release, as when in the course of psychoanalysis one uncovers by one's own effort a root, a primal memory, should have been counterbalanced by the boredom of childhood too, that agonising boredom of 'apartness' which came before one had learnt the fatal trick of transferring emotion, of flashing back enchantingly all day long one's own image, a period when other people were as distinct from oneself as this Liberian forest. I sometimes wonder whether, if one had stayed longer, if one had not been driven out again by tiredness and fear, one might have relearned the way to live without transference, with a lost objectivity.

Rain in the Air

The chief from Galaye acted as our guide back from the plateau into the forest, wearing for the occasion a black tail coat and a green beret, with one of his men to follow him and carry his sword. At a large village, Pala, they told us that the next town was Bamou, a long way off; we should certainly not reach it until six, and we had started the march at seven. There was nowhere in between where we could sleep. The men were grumbling already as

they arrived, and I could foresee a long series of angry complaints. But I wouldn't consent to stay at Pala, (that would be to delay our arrival at Ganta too long), so I didn't wait for all the carriers to arrive, to get together and rebel, but walked off with a guide, the hammock-men and Amedoo.

We went for more than three hours without passing a village, and the path was wide enough for the sun to scorch us incessantly; for lunch we had to make a clearing with swords in the bush itself to gain enough shade. But in the small village we reached at last I learnt to my relief of a town not more than an hour and a half away. The village chief was hospitable, bringing out gourds of palm wine for my carriers to drink, and I did not notice in time his unwillingness to offer his hand. Only after I had put out my own and he had reluctantly taken it did I see that it was covered with white sores. It may not have been leprosy, and in any case leprosy is only very slightly contagious, but it spoilt my food for me all that day.

I never knew the name of the place we reached. It cannot have been Bamou, for we must have left that path. It had a guest-house in a little enclosure just outside the town. The chief was sullen and inhospitable, he wouldn't provide a cooked meal for the carriers, nor would he allow them to sleep in the town. He said they would cause trouble there. I bought rice from him at the highest rate I had yet paid and he left again with his headman and a little train of disapproving ancients.

The air was heavy with thunder. The carriers felt it as they lay about in the verandah. I sat listening

to snatches of argument, until just before sunset, as the storm gathered and bore down out of the north-west, shouts and bugle-calls brought everyone to the fence. A procession was approaching the compound from the village. A man with an old sporting gun over his shoulder led the way, then a covered hammock borne by four men, attendants running on either side and one of them blowing blasts on a bugle. I thought it must be at least a French Commissioner and hoped that he would not ask to see my papers, for I had no visa which would allow us to pass through a French colony. But it wasn't a French Commissioner who stepped out of his hammock and strutted to the gate with a dog at his heels and a riding whip hung at his wrist. He was a black with tight curled ringlets and black side-whiskers. He wore an old white topee, a Fair Isle jumper, breeches and braces and a belt, gaiters and little white kid boots. He stood swinging his whip, watching us as if we were curious caged animals, with superb arrogance. Somebody said he was the chief from Djiecke, the next town on the track to Ganta. He spoke neither English nor French, but when I asked him through Mandingo Amah how far it was to Djiecke, and told him that I intended to reach the town next day, the answer came, of course, 'too far.' It seemed unlikely, for it was nearly sunset and he would hardly have planned to spend the night in the bush. When he had stared at us for long enough he swaggered back to his hammock and to the sound of one more heraldic blast was borne away swaying into the forest.

A heavy storm broke soon after dark: lightning

like one prolonged flickering illumination. The carriers slept on the floor of the verandah. The sound of their breathing and snores was very companionable in the pounding electric night, and they kept away the rats. But the storm worried me. The dry season was supposed to last another month, but sometimes the rains came early. It would never do to be caught in the interior, for on the lower level below Ganta the ways in the wet season were impassable; Central Liberia between the villages became a swamp, and we had not yet even turned towards the south.

Café Bar

Suddenly in the inconsequent manner of Africa Ganta came close and we left French Guinea behind us. On the last day the colony proved more than ever French. Djiecke took us by surprise after only two hours' march, a neat native school behind a gateway, Ecole de Djiecke, in a tidied park-like plain.

A small fussy black in a topee and European clothes and pince-nez came to meet our train from the school compound. He was very conceited, very inquisitive and we couldn't understand each other's French. When he learned that we were English he became deeply suspicious. He wanted to know where we had come from and when I said Sierra Leone he was convinced that I was lying. I think his geography was vague, for he couldn't understand that we could have come from Sierra Leone by land. He wanted to know what canton we had just left, but I didn't even know what a canton was. I thought it had something to do with Switzerland.

With every question he became more official, excited and conceited. I don't know what impression of a foreign spy he gained from my vague manner. He said we must see the French District Commissioner, a day's march away. He seemed to me dangerous; if he had authority in the town he might hold us up indefinitely. So I was polite, probably too polite, telling him that it was impossible, I must go straight on; for if this was Djiecke, Ganta was at last very close. I could see his little thin black body swelling under the drill, for he personified the power of France. He asked to see my passports and after a search in the baggage I found them and showed him the word 'France' in the list of countries for which the passport was available. I don't think it quite satisfied him, he had more brains than I bargained for, but at that moment there was an interruption. We were standing close to the chief's compound and a message came from him that we were to enter and rest, while chop was prepared for our men. If we had had a taste of French officialdom, now we were to taste French hospitality.

The chief had shed his oddly-assorted European clothes. He was dour and handsome in his native robe and his side-burns, squatting on the floor of his hut with his daughters and wives around him. The daughters were the prettiest women I had seen in Africa. They lay round and over him like kittens. The schoolmaster left us disapprovingly; there was a distinct atmosphere of sex and relaxation about the scene and it didn't suit his pedagogic mind; but soon after a boy brought in a letter from him in French which one of the girls translated to her father. I

think he may have asked the chief to detain us, for it became more and more difficult to get away. Not that I really in my heart wanted to go from the moment that the chief produced a bottle of French white wine, an enamel cup, and a tin of French cigarettes. It was like a dream: ever since we had entered French Guinea our minds had continually reverted to Dakar, to the cafés and the flowers and what seemed to us now the delicious freshness of the place where plague is endemic and the natives die of the want of will to live. I had sometimes tormented myself, washing out my mouth on the march with the warm filtered water—fruit had long since given out, without the thought of a bottle of wine.

And here it was. The chief sat grimly on the floor among his girls, with only the faintest suspicion of enjoyment about his mouth, and poured the warm sweet delicious wine into the enamel cup. He drank and passed it to me; I drank and passed it to my cousin. Back it went to the chief and was refilled. It didn't take long for the three of us to empty the bottle. We were all a little drunk in no time; the heat of the hut, the confused tumble of half-clothed girls helped. As there was no sign of the promised chop for my men, I sent a boy out to fetch a bottle of whisky from my case. The chief had never tasted whisky before, but he had innate taste; he didn't gulp down the neat spirit like the chief in Duogobmai. He sent a daughter for a pail of water and when the water was brought, he smelt it. It didn't pass his inspection, he emptied it on the ground and sent her for more. Then he settled down to drink, became grimly merry without moving from the floor and

forced the whisky on his favourite daughter, until she was drunk too. We grinned at each other and made friendly gestures.

The favourite daughter could speak a few words of English; her thigh under the tight cloth about her waist was like the soft furry rump of a kitten; she had lovely breasts: she was quite clean, much cleaner than we were. The chief wanted us to stay the night, and I began to wonder how far his hospitality might go. The girl was feeling a little sick with the whisky, but she never stopped smiling. I felt that she would be as unobtrusively and neatly sick as a cat and would afterwards be quite ready for more fun. A boy of about sixteen came in and knelt in front of his father. He pushed the whisky away; he wouldn't drink it; and now he tried to stop his father drinking. He fetched a bottle and persuaded his father to put away every other drink for future use.

It became more and more like a blind in Paris; the wine, the bitter Gallic smoke, the increasing friendliness with someone you can't speak to because you don't know the language well enough. You've run across him in the Montparnasse bar and gone on exchanging drinks ever since: you speak English and he speaks French, and you don't understand each other. There are a lot of girls about whom he seems to know and you'd vaguely like to sleep with, but you can't be bothered because the wine's good and you are beginning to feel a deep emotional friendship for the man on the other stool. He seems to know everyone: you don't understand a thing, but you are happy.

We were there two hours, right into the full heat of

the day; the men had their chop in the end, and the chief began to get sleepy and forgot that he was supposed to detain us. I don't really know why we ever went; the schoolmaster was the only blot on the place; I think we might have been very happy there all night. Perhaps if I hadn't been a bit drunk I'd have stayed, but the idea I thought I had lost, that one ought to stick to time-tables, came up again in the Parisian air, and I was a little uneasy, too, lest the schoolmaster should have sent a quick messenger to the French Commissioner and that we might find ourselves under arrest—the French colonies are very carefully preserved. So I refused to stay. Before we went I photographed the girl, but she wouldn't be taken as she was, insisted on putting on her best dress for the picture: the chief would not be photographed. By that time two men had to support him. He followed us a little way out of the village, sleepily imploring us to stay, until we were out of ear-shot.

It was another four hours' march to Ganta. Soon after Djiecke we left the forest behind and took a path through elephant grass towards the River Mani or St. John, which forms the boundary line between French Guinea and Liberia and runs south-west into the sea at Grand Bassa, a hundred and sixty miles away. That was where we were to end our march, though I didn't know it then. We were now at last off the route followed by other English travellers, for Sir Alfred Sharpe in 1919 went up northwards into French Guinea, another ninety miles or so, and then retraced his steps and went down to Monrovia between the Loffa River and the St. Paul.

The Mani here was about forty yards wide with

steep banks. We crossed by dug-out canoe, and the spirit of all the carriers lifted on the other side. They hadn't really liked France, and Mark's enthusiasm as he stepped on shore, the monkey clinging to his skull, infected them. "Now we are in our own land again." It was an unexpected example of national feeling, for they were certainly not among their own tribe; they were in the land of the Manos, where ritual cannibalism practised on strangers has never been entirely stamped out. Amah ran up and down the line of carriers with a load on his head encouraging them to a longer stride because this was Liberia.

One came to Ganta through a series of leopard traps, winding maze-like paths between walls of plaited reed, and then out on to a beaten road, beside a straggling line of huts across a wide treeless plain, up the side of a hill and down again, with the Liberian flag flying above a whitewashed compound and more people than we had seen for weeks, Mandingos and soldiers among them. There were stores here, the first we had seen in Liberia, with the goods laid out on the ground, but the whole appearance of the place was as nomadic as a forest market. It looked as if it had been built up overnight and might be shifted next morning. It was the plain, I think, which gave it that air. One was used to villages circumscribed by a hill-top, with the burial stones and the palaver-house in the centre, looking as old as the rock itself and the cracked soil. This ribbon development along a highway which was being driven north and south had a raw look. Only the District Commissioner's compound at one end and the little group of mission buildings a mile down the road at the other had a

stable air, as if the next rains wouldn't wash them away.

As our caravan came out on to the road from the river path and the leopard traps, a group of yellow-faced Liberians in European clothes, more like Italians than Africans, turned to watch us. One of them, the only dark-skinned one, took off his topee. Later in Tapee-Ta I was to get to know him better, and those soft sad lustrous seeking-a-friend eyes of his. He was called Wordsworth. He watched us yearningly as we toiled up the bare scorched road towards the Methodist mission. Already he was intent on joining that odd assortment of 'characters' (the Grants and the Kilvanes) one collects through life, vivid grotesques, people so simple that they alway have the same side turned to one, damned by their unself-consciousness to be material for the novelist, to supply the minor characters, to be endlessly caricatured, to make in their multiplicity one's world.

PART III

CHAPTER ONE

MISSION STATION

The Lowlands

MR. SOMERSET MAUGHAM, I suppose, has done more than anyone to stamp the idea of the repressed prudish man of God on the popular imagination. There was an earlier time when Stevenson's *Open Letter* allowed us to recall Father Damien; *Rain* has impressed the image of Mr. Davidson over the missionary field: the Mr. Davidson who said of his work in the Pacific Islands, "When we went there they had no sense of sin at all. They broke the commandments one after the other and never knew they were doing wrong. And I think that was the most difficult part of my work, to instil into the natives the sense of sin": the Mr. Davidson who slept with the prostitute, Sadie Thompson, and then killed himself.

I remember at school finding it a little hard to reconcile the popular idea of missionaries with the thin tired men who used to stand on a platform rapping with a small stick while the starved-looking bodies of black children slid across the screen. They seemed to be less Biblical than Mr. Davidson; they seemed to be more concerned with raising a few shillings for the support of the hideous tin church which was projected as a grim climax onto the sheet than with the sense of sin. The sense of sin lay far deeper across the altar steps of our own school chapel. Here

was all the prudery and pornography one needed. These visitors from Africa, I felt, were not only innocent beside our own masters, they were innocent among the blacks they taught. There they stood, in their ruined health and their worn simplicity, begging for our shillings for a new altar cloth, a silver cruet stand; I couldn't believe they had done much harm among the alligator societies, the human leopards, nor corrupted very effectively those men whose secret ritual it is to sacrifice a child once a year to the great python.

In Liberia I discovered another kind of missionary. I do not imagine Dr. Harley, the Methodist medical missionary, is unique in Africa: a man with a body and nerves worn threadbare by ten years' unselfish work, cutting away the pus from the huge swollen genitals, injecting for yaws, anointing for craw-craw, injecting two hundred natives a week for venereal disease. He had made his home in this corner of Liberia with his wife and two children, curious little elderly yellow-faced boys; he had lost one child, who was buried at the mission.*

All the way along the Liberian border I had heard of him; he was the man in Liberia who knew most about the bush societies; the little time that the long hopeless fight against disease allowed him was devoted to these investigations. But he did not care to talk about them before his servants for fear of poison.

We had been lent a house a hundred yards from the mission, a luxurious little house it seemed to us by this time, for it was built of wood with a tin roof,

* Dr. Harley has now completed more than 20 years at Ganta (1946).

the floor raised to escape the ants. At one end was a dispensary, and just outside was the open hospital building, long wooden benches under a roof of thatch. The forest came up at the back, like a small private wood. Ganta scared me: there was a smell of chemicals, of sickness and death about the place. Quite suddenly we had dropped down from the highlands, and the air had changed. It was heavy and damp. There were palms about and a sense of drenched ground, flies and ordure. I would never have believed that a climate could so completely change in the course of a day's march. It had an immediate effect on the health: all energy left me: that night it was difficult to walk as far as the mission house for dinner; my stomach quite suddenly ceased to function.

I remember a rather grim dinner. Dr. Harley had been out all day and was tired and ready to fall asleep where he sat; it was the dead boy's birthday. When he heard that I had walked from the Sierra Leone border without using a hammock, he said I was mad to do it; he had just sent a man—Dr. D.—home dead who had made the comparatively short trek from Monrovia on his feet. Nobody could walk long distances in this climate without danger. I tried to turn the conversation to the bush societies, but he sheered away from them. He said that Sinoe, which we had planned to reach, was at least four weeks away. The pain I had been feeling for some days now in my stomach seemed to get worse at the news. I could have been happy enough settled in one place for months, but the thought of four more weeks of physical exertion, of rising before dawn and walking

for six or seven hours through the dreadful monotony of the forest, I could not bear.

On the way back to our house I remembered we hadn't taken our quinine for two days. The rats had been at the hair-brushes and gnawed the bristles. They ran along between the wall and the roof in my room without even waiting for me to put out the light. I took a handful of Epsom in the warm boiled water from the filter which was dripping regularly in the corner and watched them scamper along the narrow crack above my head. I didn't care a damn about the rats any longer, the sisters at Bolahun were right; I was scared in the same way as I had been in England when I suddenly found that my plans had gone too far for me to back out of the Liberian journey; I could remember reading the British Blue Book and thinking, "In three weeks I shall be *there*," 'there' meaning the long list of diseases and of Colonel Davis's atrocities. I got no thrill at all; I was just scared. I comforted myself, "I shan't try for Sinoe," but I knew I hadn't the moral courage to make straight for Monrovia. The rats jumped down when I turned out the lantern, but I wasn't any longer afraid of rats. I was discovering in myself a thing I thought I had never possessed: a love of life.

Liberian Commissioner

Of course by daylight I felt better; it is difficult to believe in death before sunset. But a four weeks' longer trek to Sinoe was beyond me, especially as I hadn't enough men with me now to use the hammock. There was one other excuse, too; no money.

I had no means of getting more money at Sinoe and I should not have enough to pay the carriers after the longer trek.

We thought it politic to walk up through Ganta to call on the D.C. He wore a well-cut tropical suit, a small military moustache, his skin was slightly yellow; he looked more Latin than African. He had a reputation for fairness, honesty and efficiency. Now he was engaged in driving the Sanoquellah-Ganta road south. Once again we were encountering Liberian patriotism. This time it was of a more European brand. There was not a carrier who would not have welcomed white intervention; patriotism in their minds had nothing to do with who ruled them, it was love of a certain territory. But Commissioner Dunbar was one of the rulers. His patriotism was like a European's; to him the thought of white interference was hateful and because England's attitude to the Kru rebellion suggested a danger to Liberian independence, he suspected and disliked the English. He was courteous and reserved and it was hopeless to try to convince him that our journey had no political motive. I felt our amicable expressions becoming shrill in the effort to convince, beating hopelessly against the hard courteous surface of his mind. There was no need to convince him; but he was a man with such admirable qualities that one wanted to leave him with a good impression. But the more we struggled to leave that good impression, the more our voices sounded in our own ears false and hypocritical.

I tried to make him express some of his suspicions by mentioning the town on the forbidden coast-line, but he contented himself with saying that it would

probably take us another five weeks to reach Sinoe. Should we have to wait long for a boat to Monrovia? Perhaps a month, he said, leaning back in his wicker chair, the blazing sun over the compound behind giving his yellow handsome face a blurred black outline. It was a politic inaccuracy, because, as we learnt later, there was a weekly launch. I suggested Grand Bassa as an alternative and he encouraged the idea: we could do it in ten days, he informed us, but that was an exaggeration. He didn't know the road himself, it was used only by the Mandingo traders; impassable in the rains, it would be a very rough way through the biggest bush, but ten days should see us on the Coast.

The Commissioner had other reasons than patriotism to distrust the white man. There was a Catholic priest at Sanoquelleh, his headquarters, and the previous Commissioner had been married to a Catholic. The priest had resented the difference between Dunbar and his predecessor; Dunbar had stood strictly to the letter of the law, allowing the priest no privileges. The priest tried to get rid of him, writing letters to the President in Monrovia; and the heat and desolation worked on both men. The priest saw his chance when one of the men working on the roads fell sick. He took him into the mission and the man died there. Immediately the priest wrote a letter accusing Dunbar of having starved his workers and beaten one to the point of death. Dunbar acted with admirable promptitude; he arrived at the mission with a squad of soldiers before the man was buried and carried both the body and the priest over the eighteen miles to Ganta, where he asked the

American doctor to examine the body. Dr. Harley exonerated him and the priest was expelled from the Republic. As for Dunbar, he had been made to realise that whites were not only hypocritical in their attitude to the Republic, they could be crooked in their dealings with individuals.

The Secret Societies

That afternoon the doctor came in to talk about the bush societies. His investigations were the only enthusiasm he had kept after ten years, but he wanted to be sure that my boys were out of the house. I went and looked in the kitchen where they slept. It was empty. Laminah was sitting in the shade of the hospital looking sick. The doctor had drawn a tooth of his in the morning: I had heard the painful dog-like howls through the wooden wall: and now he was afraid that he was going to die because the gum still bled. He was too sophisticated to paint himself with native medicine, but he had brought a pot of cold cream with him from Freetown and was smearing it all over his face and neck and scalp.

I am not an anthropologist and I cannot pretend to remember very much of what Dr. Harley told me: a pity, for no white man is closer to that particular "heart of darkness", the secret societies being more firmly rooted in Liberia than in any other country on the West Coast. The Government have put up the feeblest of resistances: though Colonel Davis, so he told me later, had court-martialled and shot fifty members of the Leopard Society in a village near Grand Bassa. Indeed, they could not properly resist

because they *believed*. President King himself was rumoured to have been a member of the Alligator Society. When the League of Nations Commission was appointed to inquire into Liberian conditions, Mr. King and several members of his cabinet—so it was believed in Monrovia—had sacrificed a goat. After the sacrifice, which should traditionally have been a human one, a boatload of young Krus had been drowned close to the beach at Monrovia, and it was generally felt that the alligator was dissatisfied with the goat.

It is a grim world, this of the societies, of the four men who, Dr. Harley said, came to Ganta a year or two back from the north looking for a victim. Everyone in Ganta knew they were there, with their ritual need of the heart, the palms of the hands, the skin of the forehead, but no one knew who they were. The Frontier Force were active, searching for strangers. Presently the fear passed. The Manos round Ganta knew what the men were seeking, for they have their own cannibalistic societies, and though I had said nothing of this to my boys and there were no Manos among the carriers, Laminah and Amedoo knew all about it. Laminah said to me one day, "These people bad, they chop men," and they were happy to leave the Manos behind. This is the territory the United States map marks so vaguely and excitingly as "Cannibal".

The Terrapin Society of the women and the Snake Society of the men, of course, are not peculiar to the Manos. There is the ordinary snake society, a kind of post-graduate course in handling snakes, in curing their bites and dancing the snake dance, and the

secret society which does actually worship a python, to which one baby should be sacrificed each year by the fully initiated. This was a common terror once: we came across the memory of what I suppose was a related cult at the sacred waterfall beyond Ganta; now only in Liberia, where the secret societies are so immune from interference, do cases of child murder or disappearance occur with any frequency.

Dr. Harley was particularly pleased with having discovered the nature of one devil, the most sacred in the women's eyes, whom it is death for a woman to see. He found it was not an individual at all, but a circle of young warriors who had entered bush school at the same time as the chief's son. The women were warned by drums that the great devil was out, and the young men danced fully armed beating the ground with staffs.

Among all these devils, Dr. Harley said, there was one supreme devil, whose fiat ran the length of the Coast and who had the power to stop war between tribe and tribe. He could appear simultaneously in places far apart: he was known by his distinctive mask and robes. These were probably stored in every place of importance along the Coast, above the palaver-house or in the blacksmith's hut. For the blacksmith of Mosambolahun, it appeared, was not peculiar in being the local devil. Dr. Harley was inclined to believe that the craft of blacksmith was always linked with the status of devil.

It is a curiously Kafka-like situation: headmasters who wear masks and turn out to be the local blacksmith . . . One reaches the village at the foot of the *Schloss*, to discover that almost anyone may be

the master of the *Schloss*; his agents are everywhere . . . there is an atmosphere of force and terror . . . occasionally beauty . . . 'meaning behind meaning, form behind form'. I can imagine that after seven years of investigating this formal but Protean religion, one may still despair of an interpretation. Olga in Kafka's novel, it will be remembered, tried to construct "out of glimpses and rumours and through various distorting factors" an image of Klamm. "He's reported as having one appearance when he comes into the village and another on leaving it, after having his beer he looks different from what he does before it, when he's awake he's different from when he's asleep, when he's alone he's different from when he's talking to people, and—what is comprehensible after all that—he's almost another person up in the Castle." Take the case of the rich and sinister headman at Zigita: for all anyone knew he might be the devil himself . . . or was the devil the blacksmith? or was there a devil in the sense of an individual at all, any more than the group of young warriors had been a devil, was it perhaps a fraud practised by the initiates? But it was a mistake to suggest that the young warriors were frauds: in their composite form they *were* the devil.

Then take the masks. I had asked Mark whether he feared Landow when he was out of his mask and just the blacksmith of Mosambolahun; and it was obvious that he feared him less, but that even then the blacksmith retained an aura of something not quite human. Did the supernatural rest in the mask? No, one person would say, it was in the combination of the two, but on the other hand old disused masks

were often retained as charms and 'fed', and there *were* masks, even apart from the man who wore them, which it was fatal to a woman to see: fatal presumably because the devil's agents would exact retribution, with the knife or with poison, but to what extent was this human punishment also supernatural?

'Devil', of course, is a word used by the English-speaking native to describe something unknown in *our* theology: it has nothing to do with evil. One might equally call these big bush devils angels—for they have the angelic properties of alacrity and invisibility—if that word contained no element of 'good'. In a Christian land we have grown so accustomed to the idea of a spiritual war, of God and Satan, that this supernatural world, which is neither good nor evil but simply Power, is almost beyond sympathetic comprehension. Not quite: for those witches which haunted our childhood were neither good nor evil. They terrified us with their power, but we knew all the time that we must not escape them. They simply demanded recognition: flight was a weakness.

That night Dr. Harley showed us a grotesquely horrible collection of devils' masks. Each one had obviously been made by a conscious artist. No effect was accidental. Here were the two-faced masks of a woman's society; here male masks which women were forbidden to see. These were different from the masks worn by the dancing devils. Those had been part human, part animal, these were modelled closely on human features. There was one with a thin beard made of chicken's feathers, and another, the oldest (it looked at least three hundred years old), had the

thin nose, the high brow of a European. It was quite different from any other mask I saw. It might have been modelled on the features of some Portuguese sailor wrecked or marooned on the West Coast, or it may have gone back no further than a slave-trader at the beginning of the last century, a man like Canot whose autobiography is set on this Liberian coast, a hanger-on perhaps of his Portuguese employer, Don Pedro Blanco, who built his extraordinary palace on the debated marshy land between Liberia and Sierra Leone, near Sherbro, where the cargo steamers of Elder Dempster still sometimes call, to their crew's discomfort, a palace with separate islands for his seraglio, with billiard rooms and all the advantages of both European and African civilisation. The man on whom the mask was modelled, of course, was as dead as Canot, as the Liberian forest which some urgent motive had caused him to penetrate—perhaps the desire for gold or slaves: but all the power of his motive had gone into the mask. I do not think it was greed: it was a fanatical Curiosity which leant out of the empty eyeballs.

A Sacred Waterfall

Before we left Ganta I learned of a sacred waterfall in the forest near the village of Zugbei. If we made a detour on the way to Sakripie, our next big town, we would pass the village. One of Harley's pupils at the mission school was chief there, and though the existence of the waterfall had been kept secret from Dr. Harley for many years, his pupil had lately shown signs of willingness to guide him to it. Human sacri-

fice had once been offered at the falls, but now the paths were no longer kept open.

Next morning, as we were about to start along Dunbar's new road north-east to Zuluyi, I heard that Babu could go no further, he was sick. He had been one of the few men, though he spoke no word of English, with whom I thought I had some contact. I had known him to be completely dependable; he had not joined with the carriers who had struck for more pay. I think he was genuinely sick; he had been given heavy loads the last few days and he was not strong, and none of the carriers would have chosen by this time to stay behind alone among a strange tribe, at least ten days' trek away from his own people. I should have liked to dismiss him with a handsome present, but it would only have encouraged others to go sick. I had to pretend anger and pay him off with a very small dash. I felt guilty of a meanness; he had no friends among the carriers, except Guawa, the other Buzie, and they taunted him. I would have lost any of them more willingly.

But it was awkward to lose any man when I was beginning to feel that I might soon need a hammock badly. There were not enough men now to carry even an empty hammock. I had to tell them to take the heavy pole out and leave it behind and add the hammock to one of the lighter loads. I could see the doctor watching me, critically; he didn't have to tell me what he was thinking.

It was about two hours' walk to Zuluyi. The chief there had been one of Harley's pupils and came to guide us to Zugbei. We passed through a thick steep forest country, up the slopes of what the natives be-

lieved to be a holy hill. Tiny fairy people, the chief said, had lived on this hill and they used to come down and help the Manos in war. Harley was interested; it was the first he had heard of any pygmy traditions in Liberia. There might be remains . . . I think he was picturing to himself reports, excavations, wall paintings, and the only kind of glory his altruistic spirit could appreciate. There was a big hole, the chief said, pointing up a path which disappeared a few feet away into the trees and underbrush, where the small people used to live. Boys used to go once a year with gifts into the hole. The last boy who had gone to the hole was still alive, an old man, in Zugbei. He had had his head shaved, but when he came out his hair was dressed in ringlets. Now no one went into the hole any more, but gifts were still brought.

We reached Zugbei, a tiny village, in the fiercest heat of the day: a worse heat than we had had in the highlands; the air was already saturated with the coming rains. The villages were no longer perched on thimbles of rock above the forest. One came straight into them from the bush; they were like little dried-up airless pools.

The chief led us to the waterfall. None of us expected to see more than a thin trickle of water over a few boulders, for some of the large rivers were so low that the carriers could wade through them and the dug-out canoes lay on the banks cracking for want of use. We walked straight into the thickest wall of forest. The chief and another man led, clearing a path with cutlasses. It was impossible to tell how they knew the way. They walked along fallen trees,

scrambled down slopes at an angle of forty-five degrees, cutting all the time; there was no sign of a path. Then suddenly at the bottom of the steepest hill we came out into a dell full of the sound of water, which streamed under feathers of foam over a fall sixty feet deep. All the slopes became alive with people, girls with the pretty horn-shaped breasts of the Manos, men with cutlasses. The whole village seemed to have come with us, but the forest had been so thick we had seen only the chief and his companion. They sat on the slopes staring at the incredible bounty of water. Within the young chief's memory there had been human sacrifices at the fall, the feeding of a slave at the end of each dry season to a snake, a hundred feet long, who had lain below the fall. It was the myth of the rainbow snake which one finds as far afield as Australia: the materialisation of the rainbow shimmer in the falling water. The sacrifice had ended when the present chief was a child. The slave, though his hands were tied behind him, had grasped the chief's robe and carried him over the edge of the fall. That had been the end of the sacrifice and the snake had gone down the river to the St. John and lived now in a pool, very close to where we crossed, between Ganta and Djiecke.

We said good-bye to Dr. Harley in Zugbei. We could have slept there, but I couldn't bear the thought that we had not yet turned south. I wanted at least the sensation of moving, however short a distance, towards the coast. So we went on for half an hour due south to a dull village of which I couldn't learn the name. It sounded like Mombei. The chief would have no chop cooked for the men, but he dashed me

a hamper of rice and they cooked their own. As usual there was no peace when we arrived. I was feeling sick and tired. The scramble in the heat to and from the waterfall had exhausted me more than a long trek, and it angered me that, directly I sat down, a carrier called Siafa came to show me his venereal sore. He had had it for three years, he hadn't shown it to the doctor, who could have injected him, and I felt he might have kept it for a few more weeks untended. But there was one thing I couldn't afford to do, show my impatience or my lack of knowledge. Daily after that I went through the farce of dressing the sore. Afterwards I dosed myself heavily with Epsom and went to bed; suddenly I felt hopelessly tired of rats; we were no longer short of kerosene, so I left my lamp burning, but it made no difference. There were always shadows for them to play in. The Epsom brought me out of my bed in the night to the edge of the forest. It was almost full moon and the huts stood out in a bright greenish daylight. It was absolutely quiet: not a sound from the dark dead forest. Every door was closed and the goats were the only living things in sight, as they wandered sleeplessly between the huts. I thought even then that the scene was beautiful, but the thought did not alter my impatience to be gone. The spell would only work after many months; now all I wanted was medicine, a bath, iced drinks, and something other than this bush lavatory of trees and dead leaves where at any moment I might crouch upon a snake in the darkness.

Mythology

I dreamed that I was two thousand miles away from the mud hut and someone was outside the door waiting to come in. Perhaps a goat stumbling across the threshold and the dead fire caused the dream, or maybe a memory of the masks on Harley's table, bobbing up one after another into the sleeping mind, like grotesque balloons at a carnival released towards the ceiling, each with its individual expression of terror and power.

It is the earliest dream that I can remember, earlier than the witch at the corner of the nursery passage, this dream of something outside that has got to come in. The witch, like the masked dancers, has form, but this is simply power, a force exerted on a door, an influence that drifted after me upstairs and pressed against windows.

Later the presence took many odd forms: a troop of black-skinned girls who carried poison flowers which it was death to touch; an old Arab; a half-caste; armed men with shaven heads and narrow eyes and the appearance of Thibetans out of a travel book; a Chinese detective.

You couldn't call these things evil, as Peter Quint in *The Turn of the Screw* was evil, with his carrotty hair and his white face of damnation. That story of James's belongs to the Christian, the orthodox imagination. Mine were devils only in the African sense of beings who controlled power. They were not even always terrifying. I remember that at the age of sixteen it was a being with the absurdly symbolic title of the Princess of Time who haunted my sleep. The

poisoned flowers, the Thibetan guards, the old Arab whom I think of now as someone like the Mandingo chief at Koinya, were all in her service. I can still recall the dull pain in my palms and my insteps when I deliberately touched the flowers, for I was always trying to escape her, her kindliness as well as her destructiveness. Once I was incited to kill her: I was given a book of ritual, bound in limp leather like an Omar Khayyâm at Christmas-time, and a dagger. But she survived into many later dreams. Any dream which opened with terror, with flight, with falling, with unseen presences and opening doors, might end with her cruel and reassuring presence.

It was only many years later that Evil came into my dreams: the man with gold teeth and rubber surgical gloves; the old woman with ringworm; the man with his throat cut dragging himself across the carpet to the bed.

CHAPTER TWO

"CIVILISED MAN"

Full Moon

ALONG the northern border we had been walking through the edge of the enormous bush; now we moved steadily lower and deeper into its heart. The deadness was sometimes broken by the squabble of monkeys; a baboon once crossed the path, running bent like an old man with the tips of its fingers just

touching the ground; a leopard's pads marked the sand by a stream, where a snake had come to drink. And outside the first village, Yeibo, there was a round shallow pond under thorn trees with great carp-like fish lounging lazily in the shadows. It was still early morning, I was happy with the sense that every step was towards home, there was something peculiarly English about the fish, the pond, the quite small trees. It was a foolish mind that had come all this way to find pleasure in a sight so vaguely, so remotely English, a pleasure I felt again when we came out of the forest into a stretch of land like a Midland park; a small stream, a long undulating pasture, a few cows, and groups of trees, like elms, in the long grass. A quarter of a mile away the forest wall set a limit to England, and across the stream in single file came a few men, naked except for their loin-cloths, carrying bows and steel-tipped arrows. It was like the world of Miss Nesbit, where odd savage people appear in country lanes; they might have been coming through the Amulet out of the African forest into an English park. We passed them, going ourselves into Africa, while they with their bows and arrows, their naked cicatrised bodies, went on into the park, towards the great house and the butler's pantry.

Six hours brought us to Peyi, where the chief was friendly and the hut clean and the village very poor. Nearly everyone was old and diseased, withered, goitered, with venereal sores. The chief had no authority; he was making a mat when we arrived, and when he had finished the villagers crowded on to it, pushing the chief off. There they lounged out-

side our hut until the full heat of the afternoon dispersed them, watching everything we did, and a girl had her hair deloused by an old woman with sores over her hands.

Eighteen of the carriers approached the hut; I no longer feared a strike or desertion: they were too far away from their own homes for that. And they had developed a kind of pride in the journey. It was a rare adventure in a country where carriers were usually employed from village to village by the day. I heard them sometimes on the march answering proudly "Bolahun" to questioners. It didn't matter that these strangers had no idea where Bolahun lay. *They* knew what miles of forest and river they had come, how they had even passed through France, and presently were going to reach the sea.

Now they wanted to borrow threepence each out of their wages. At Ganta they had borrowed two shillings from the cook to buy a goat with, and he demanded sixpence interest, a rate of about fifty per cent a week. The rest of the money they were going to spend on palm wine and extra soup (the name they had for the horrible anonymous wedges of meat or fish with which they cooked their rice). The chief took their money, but he gave them nothing in return, and in this poor village he could find them only one pail of rice for their chop.

But, curiously enough, this didn't matter. They bore no malice. It was the night of full moon. They had very little to eat, they had nothing to drink, the moon and its deep green light made them happy. They even shared their small meal with the chief and until very late the village was full of song and

laughter and running feet. They were crazy with pleasure in the small moon-filled clearing. One could only envy them: we, the civilised, had lost touch with the real lunar influence. It meant to us self-conscious emotion, crooners and little sentimental songs of lust and separation; at best a cerebral worked-up excitement. It couldn't mean this physical outburst, this unthinking tidal urge to joy. Mark said to me on the next day's march, "Last night we were so happy." Next night to our eyes the moon would be just as full, they had no calendars to tell them that the moon was on the wane, they didn't need calendars. Night after night they had felt the tightening of the influence that binds us to the cold empty craters; now they felt it loosen. Every month the world turned back into its empty sky.

Steve Dunbar

A young man in a Boy Scout's hat and native robe came to meet us next day in the wide clean streets of Sakripie, where there were stores and Mandingo traders in turbans and soldiers of the Frontier Force: a Paramount Chief's town.

The Paramount Chief was away, but this was his son who came and led us to a guest-house in the chief's compound, a huge square with a flag-pole surrounded by whitewashed huts belonging to his wives. He had the ingratiating air of a motor salesman, but he was harassed all the time because he had no authority; he was a joke, no one troubled to obey him. He had a faint hope, I think, as he sat with me on the verandah of the guest-house that our coming

would give him prestige. He sent for a chicken and some eggs but nobody brought them. He swore at everyone he could see; he was almost in tears with vexation.

"My name," a voice said softly behind me, "is Steve Dunbar. I am very pleased to meet you. These chairs are yours? They are very nice. I have been looking at your beds." I looked round. A middle-aged Mandingo in a scarlet fez and a native robe nodded and smiled. He spoke excellent English. He said, "You are travelling through our country. I hope you have met hospitality everywhere. Your chairs are very interesting. I have not seen anything like them."

"They fold up," I said.

"That is very interesting. I will buy one of them."

He told me again, "My name is Steve Dunbar. I am interested also in your bed. And this table" (it was a card-table bought for three and elevenpence).

"That too folds up? I will buy that."

I said, "I'm sorry. You see, we've got to get to Monrovia. I can't possibly sell them before that."

He changed the subject quite suddenly. "This chief," he said "is a good young man. If you want anything done tell me." I said I wanted chop for the men; I would pay a good dash for it in the morning. He told the chief. "The chief," he said, "agrees."

"I want the chop quite early," I said. "They didn't have much food last night."

The chief fanned himself with the Boy Scout cap. He was hot and excited. He sent several men off in different directions.

"You are going to Ganta?" Steve Dunbar said.

"No, no," I said. "To Monrovia. But first to Grand Bassa. And Tapee-Ta. How do we get to Tapee-Ta?"

"You want to see elephants?" Steve Dunbar said. "You will see plenty. Hundreds. You go to Baplai. There is a civilised man at Baplai. He is a friend of mine. Mr. Nelson. You will find him very agreeable. You may say you are my friend. From Baplai you will go to Toweh-Ta. You will see lots of elephants. They will run backwards and forwards all the time over the path." Across Steve Dunbar's shoulder I caught sight of Laminah's startled face. Steve Dunbar said, "I will leave you now, but I will see you again in Monrovia and we will talk about the bed and the chair." He stepped inside and looked at the bed again and then made off across the compound followed by his boy; he had the air of a well-established firm. The chief and I sat in silence. He had his eye on the bottle which Amedoo had put out on the card-table. Presently I could stand his sad covetousness no longer; I gave him a few fingers of neat whisky and he went away.

Almost immediately Laminah was at my side. He was excited (his woollen cap and bobble were all askew), and when he was excited it was almost impossible to understand him. I gathered he wanted a goat. "For chop?" No, it wasn't for chop. He said something about elephants. Amedoo came forward and explained that our path from now on would be through the biggest bush, that there were lots of elephants, and the labourers wanted a goat. I still didn't understand. He explained that elephants were frightened by the noise a goat made; it need only be a very, very small goat. It seemed a tall story, but if

it made them feel safer to have a goat, I didn't mind paying for one. Goats had only cost two shillings at Ganta. I told the Paramount Chief's messenger, who still hung about the verandah, that we wanted to buy a goat. About an hour later a piccaninny, not more than three and a half feet high, arrived with a tiny kid slung across his shoulders. The owner wanted six shillings for it; goats were, apparently, at a premium on the edge of elephant country. The carriers were indignant; they wanted a goat, but they would lose face if their employer paid too much; they would rather dare the elephants without protection. So I refused it, even when the price went down to four shillings. The carriers had never been outside the borders of their northern tribes before; they could never understand that prices varied according to supply and demand. When the price of rice, from Sakripie onwards, began to advance, they were shocked and indignant; they felt we were being humbugged.

I learned the origin of the goat idea later at Tapee from Colonel Davis, the Kru coast warrior. Apparently a goat once made a bet with an elephant that he could eat more at a meal. The elephant ate and ate and fell asleep. When he woke the goat was standing on the top of a high rock. He said he had eaten everything around and was now going to start on the elephant. From that day all elephants have feared the voice of a goat. I'm not sure whether Colonel Davis believed the story or not.

When the sun was low a clamour of voices brought me from bed. The population of Sakripie was pouring into the compound behind two huge stilted and

masked devils. They must have stood more than eighteen feet high. They wore tall witches' hats rimmed with little shells; their faces were black, the masks looked as if they had been made out of old cotton stockings, they wore striped pyjama jackets, with the sleeves sewn up to hide the hands, and pyjama shorts, while the stilts were wound with a thinner striped material. Their performance was humorous and sophisticated. They sat down on the roof-tops and idly fanned themselves with their legs crossed, then stretched a leg right across the thatch and pretended to fall asleep. They had a sense of climax which would have earned the applause of the most sophisticated music-hall audience as they leaned back their whole stiff inarticulated length at an angle of about twenty degrees and just recovered as they began to fall. They had the usual interpreter with them. He lay on the ground while they hopped on one stilt towards him, so that it seemed almost inevitable that the wooden hoof would be planted on his face; but always at the last moment they cleared him. When the entertainment was over, they left the compound by the wall; the gateway was too low for them. They sat on the ten-foot wall and lifted over each stiff leg in turn like old men crossing a stile, and for a long while after their witch hats were visible bobbing away above the huts towards their own compound.

It was dusk when they had gone, and I began to be impatient for the carriers' chop. It was nearly forty-eight hours since they had eaten a really good meal. I sent a messenger for the chief, who said that the chop was at that moment being cooked. I made the

mistake of giving him whisky, thinking it would make him more ready to do what I wanted, but it only made him sleepy and confused and less able than ever to deal with his disobedient townspeople. When it was quite dark and we were sitting in the compound squeezing limes into our whisky, he returned with a pretty nubile girl who was one of his two wives. His father the Paramount Chief, he said, had fifty-five. He drank more whisky and became rather fuddled. I was aware of the carriers hovering miserably out of range of my hurricane lamp; I wanted to impress them that I was doing something about their food, I was feeling guilty sitting there drinking whisky, waiting for my own chop to be served. I told the chief he was lying, that he had done nothing about the men's chop, and he leapt up, dignified and drunk and a little too plausible like the motor salesman he should have been. He said he would show me that he was not a liar; the chop was cooking now—I had only to follow him, and he set off with long strides towards the town. I called out into the shadows for Vande and pursued him at the run. It was a very lovely night; I had never seen so many stars; the whisky made me want to be at peace with all the world; I was quite ready to take the chief's word when he halted outside one of the furthest huts and pointed to a circle of women, their faces lit by the slow low flames of the wood fire on which they were boiling a great cauldron of rice. "Is it enough?" I asked Vande, and Vande said, Yes, it was enough. Neither of us could speak the language and ask the women whether the food was really intended for the carriers. A few sullen notabilities of

the place loitered at the edge of the dark, hating us, hating the young drunk chief. We returned and presently I went to bed. After an hour or two someone moved in my hut. It was Amedoo come to tell me that the carriers had received no chop at all and had gone hungry to their beds.

The Tax-gatherer

The dry weather *was* breaking: in a few weeks the way to Grand Bassa would be impossible. When I woke at half-past five the rain was pouring down, the empty compound was lit by green lightning. The chief's cows, great cream-coloured beasts with curled horns and velvet eyes, were standing close against the women's huts for shelter. It looked as if we shouldn't get away till late. There was no sign of the carriers: it was not until half-past six when the rain had stopped, though the lightning flickered on, that they drifted into the compound, wet and hungry and miserable.

I called Vande, gave him half a crown to buy a goat with whenever he chose, and told them to cook the little rice we had with us and eat it before starting. Then the young chief appeared in the compound; he had an aching head and a dry mouth, and he was embarrassed and ashamed. I pretended not to notice him until he climbed on to my verandah, and then I didn't offer him a chair. I waited until my carriers were close and then I cursed him. I was very Imperialist, very prefectorial as I told him that a chief must be judged by his discipline, that he ought not to allow his headman to disobey him. *He* couldn't tell

my satiric self-criticism as the ghost of Arnold of Rugby addressed his head prefect through my lips.

We did not get away from Sakripie till nine-thirty; we had never before been so late in starting, for by ten the heat was always intense. The paths were rougher than any we had encountered since Zigita, and the storm gave us an indication of how impossible the route would be when the rains set in. Already the paths were turning into swamps and the men had sometimes to wade waist-deep in water. We were not taking the quickest route to Tapee, which would have involved two long and scorching days on a path cleared of shade, and the villagers we now passed saw white faces for the first time. They ran screaming beside us, waving sprays of leaves, until we reached the boundary of the village land; there they always stopped at some invisible line across the forest path. Once they tried to seize my cousin's hammock and rush it triumphantly through a village, but Amedoo drew his sword and held them off.

After five hours we reached Baplai. We were by this time among the Gio tribe, who live on the extreme edge of subsistence in the great bush. The steep pointed roofs were falling in, and the inhabitants were quite naked except for loin-cloths. They were so thin one expected to see the bones through the venereal sores. The presence of a 'civilised man', however, ensured their keeping a rest-house, one musty little hut with two rooms the size of large dog kennel, where, I suppose, Liberian Government agents slept if ever they came up into the Gio tribe.

Mr. Nelson appeared from his own hut next door. He wore a pair of torn white trousers, backless slippers

on his grey naked feet and a torn pyjama jacket which had lost most of its buttons. On his head was a kind of rough-rider's hat, and his eyeballs were yellow and malarious. All vitality, except a little malice and covetousness, had been drained out of the half-cast, who lived here, year in, year out, squeezing taxes out of the bare village, with no pay but the percentage he chose to steal. He was officially reckoned civilised because he could speak English and write his name.

When I came in with my carriers he thought I was a Government agent and asked me what my 'privileges' were: how many free labourers I was allowed, how many hampers of rice unpaid for from this starved village. I said I had no privileges but wished to buy food for my men.

"Buy?" Mr. Nelson said, "Buy? That's not so easy." He said with a faint flicker of hatred, "These people would rather be forced to give than sell." Later I photographed him with his wife, an old Gio woman naked to the waist, and he came and sat beside me and talked languidly of politics. I spoke of the coming election. He said that Mr. King had no chance of re-election, but all his opinion meant was that he owed his position, if you could call his dreary exile by that name, to Mr. Barclay's party. If King succeeded Barclay, even the Nelsons would be ruined. I asked him about Mr. Faulkner, who contested the election in 1928 against King and who had started the League of Nations inquiry into slavery. Mr. Faulkner had won the uneasy respect of everyone in Liberia; he had refused minor offices in every Government; he had spent all his own money, earned as an electrical engineer and the owner of Monrovia's

only refrigerating plant, in fighting president after president in the cause of reform. "But no," Mr. Nelson said, turning his yellow malicious eyes over the pointed leaking huts, "we don't like Faulkner." After a while he found enough vitality to explain, "You see, he has an idea."

"What idea?" I said.

"Nobody knows," Mr. Nelson said, "but we don't like it."

A young man came out of the forest in the evening light followed by a boy with a gun. He was a native, with a round sad gentle face, dressed in plus-fours with bright little tassels below the knee and the same rough-rider hat as Mr. Nelson wore. He introduced himself: he was Victor Prosser, a Bassa man, schoolmaster of Toweh-Ta. He had been on a visit to the Catholic priest at Sanoquelleh, two days' march away, to make his confession and fetch back to school his youngest pupil. He was a devout young man who had been educated by the Catholic fathers on the Coast, and was now established as the head of a little mission school. When he heard that I was a Catholic too, he was overjoyed. He sat there beside Mr. Nelson, repeating over and over again in a soft hesitating English I had to bend my head to catch, "That's very good. That's *good*. Very good. That *is* good." Mr. Nelson eyed him sourly and cynically and left us.

Victor Prosser said that he would call his youngest pupil to read me the Catechism, and gave an order to the boy with the gun. He didn't ask whether I would like to hear the child; he assumed that any Catholic would be pleased to hear the Catechism

recited at any time. The piccaninny appeared: a tiny creature of about three years old, dressed in nothing but a transparent shirt. The dark settled over Baplai as he began rapidly to read, his pronunciation so odd that I could only recognise occasional words—venial: purgatory: Communion of Saints. Victor Prosser interrupted him, "What is purgatory?" and the small Gio repeated rapidly the definition established by I know not what council of the medieval church, "Purgatory is that state . . ." He wasn't really reading, I could tell that: he had learnt the whole thing off by heart, but if I were inclined to criticise the value of *that*, there before me was Victor Prosser who had in his time too been a piccaninny with nothing but a retentive memory for words which meant nothing to him at all, and now sat there visibly entranced over 'purgatory' and 'the communion of saints'. The child, too, had an ancient English reader with little steel engravings of ladies in bustles and gentlemen with trousers buckled below their boots. Victor Prosser refused the drink I offered him and, rising to go, said that he would lead us himself next morning on our road as far as Toweh-Ta.

So this bare grimy pool in the deep forest had more goodness in it than we had expected: even the fat chief in his dirty robe and battered bowler, who had greeted us so surlily when we entered, mistaking us, as Mr. Nelson had done, for Government agents, proved himself to possess a kindly heart. Amah and Vande were quite drunk with palm wine long before dark, and when we ourselves were sitting at dinner the waving of half a dozen torches announced the chief's approach with the carriers' chop. He stood

there swaying in front of us between two tipsy torchbearers, while Vande whispered in my ear, "Chief good man. Chief very good man," and his men brought up between the pointed huts, under the light of the flaming splinters, bowl after bowl of food. The carriers had never seen such a feast. Its stink reeked in the hot flyey night, the stink of fourteen bowls of chop and three bowls of meat scraps.

Later I was a little drunk myself, not this time for fear of rats but from mere good fellowship. I remember wandering round the village listening to the laughter and the music among the little glowing fires and thinking that, after all, the whole journey was worth while: it did reawaken a kind of hope in human nature. If one could get back to this bareness, simplicity, instinctive friendliness, feeling rather than thought, and start again . . .

I was more spellbound, I suppose, than Vande, who clutched my sleeve in the shadow of a hut and begged me to take the half-crown I had given him that morning into safe keeping: he was afraid to carry such wealth about him among this low bush tribe. He took a green leaf out of his pocket and unwrapped it: inside the leaf was a match-box: inside the match-box another leaf, and inside that the silver coin. Then he went back to his palm wine and later I encountered him again wandering in blissful drunkenness, hand in hand with the headman of the village, who had reserved for him a special bowl.

"All Hail, Liberia, Hail!"

I woke at five. In my dream someone had been reciting Milton's *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. The version belonged entirely to sleep, but it seemed to me more moving than any poetry I had ever heard before. Two lines, "Angels bright Bathed in white light", brought tears to my eyes, and for a long while after I woke I believed them to be beautiful and even to have been written by Milton. The darkness was thinning behind the pointed huts. The smell of goats blew in on the damp misty wind. It was Victor Prosser, I suppose, who was responsible, who had brought the idea of God and heavenly hierarchies, of crystal spheres and light insufferable, into the empty pagan land.

I said good-bye to the chief and Mr. Nelson. When I gave the chief a present of money he was taken aback, he wasn't used to payment and automatically held it out to the tax-gatherer, and automatically Mr. Nelson's hand moved towards it. Then he remembered he was observed and turned the movement into a jest, a hollow jest unshared by the drained malarious eyes.

Victor Prosser had gone ahead with my cousin. There were a lot of things he wanted to learn before he reached Toweh-Ta. Was it true that Queen Elizabeth was a Protestant, and Mary Queen of Scots a Catholic like himself? Where did the Thames rise? Was London on the Tiber as well as the Thames? Were Sweden and Switzerland the same country? He asked what London was like, and my cousin chose to tell him of the underground trains, but it wasn't

an easy idea to convey to someone who had never seen an ordinary train. "Very remarkable," he said coldly and disbelievingly at the end of it and changed the subject by humming *God Save the King*. The boy with the gun walked behind and last followed the tiny piccaninny in the transparent vest. Victor Prosser walked very slowly, and with some pain, because he wore backless slippers for the sake of his prestige as head teacher of Toweh-Ta.

He asked my cousin to join him in singing *God Save the King*, which the Catholic missionaries on the Coast had taught him; I can't imagine why, for they were all of them Irish. He said he knew some Protestant hymns and insisted they should sing *Onward, Christian Soldiers* together as they picked their way through the Liberian jungle. When I joined them he and his two schoolboys were singing the Liberian national anthem:

All hail, Liberia, hail!
All hail, Liberia, hail!
This glorious land of liberty shall long be ours,
Tho' new her name, green be her fame,
And mighty be her powers.
In joy and gladness with our hearts united,
We'll shout the freedom of a land benighted.
Long live Liberia, happy land,
A home of glorious liberty by God's command.

All hail, Liberia, hail!
All hail, Liberia, hail!
In union strong success is sure, we cannot fail
With God above our rights to prove.

We will o'er all prevail.
 With heart and hand our country's cause
 defending,
 We'll meet the foe with valour unpretending.
 Long live Liberia, happy land,
 A home of glorious liberty by God's command.

The patriotic sentiments sounded better as I heard them later bawled by a school of two hundred children in Monrovia; here it was "the land benighted", the tall trees standing like cliffs of dull green stone on either side, which really prevailed. After a while Victor Prosser ceased to sing and dropped farther and farther behind in his flopping slippers. I could hear him humming *Venite, Adoremus*, as we passed the coffin-shaped holes dug by some Dutch prospector, who had been that way alone a year before.

Toweh-Ta was quite a large town; a Paramount Chief had his compound there, and the forest was cleared away from its outskirts. A broad bare road sloped up to it and a big square hut behind a fence at the beginning of the road was Victor Prosser's school. His manner had altered; here he was someone of importance. It was about half-past nine by our time, which agreed roughly with the handsome silver watch Victor Prosser had won on the Coast. School, he said, would have started; his assistant would be controlling the boys till his coming, and he asked us in to see the class at work. But when he opened the door there was no class: only a little room of empty benches, a cane balanced on two nails, a desk which just succeeded in standing on four loose crooked legs.

And when Victor Prosser angrily demanded why the school bell had not been rung, the young assistant pointed to a rusty kitchen alarm clock on the desk. By *his* time it was only eight-forty-five. Victor Prosser was embarrassed: we all compared watches: then he rang the bell, put the clock to nine and led us up the hill to the Paramount Chief's cookhouse.

This impressive building was too large for me to photograph: I couldn't get far enough from it. A circular building with open sides, it had a huge cone chimney of smoothly plaited reeds. Where it fitted down over us like a fool's cap it must have been about a hundred and fifty feet in diameter, and it narrowed very gradually until through the top, more than the height of Salisbury Cathedral nave, a handkerchief of sky was visible. Here the town chief came and dashed me a chicken and a hamper of rice—embarrassingly, for the hamper was a man's load and my cousin's hammock-men had had to be reduced to three.

It was another five hours' march to Greh, by a track of appalling monotony. I tried to think of my next novel, but I was afraid to think of it for long, for then there might be nothing to think about next day. Greh, at the end of it all, proved an even more primitive village than Baplai. It was impossible for us to sleep in the huts, for their roofs were built so low that we could not stand upright, and there was no room for the poles of the mosquito-nets. So I ordered our beds to be put up in the cookhouse in the centre of the village, to Amedoo's distress; he had never travelled before with white people outside Sierra Leone, and we lost caste by exposing ourselves to the

stares of the villagers in the wall-less cookhouse.

There was one boy, the chief's son, who could speak English, for he had been educated on the Coast and called himself Samuel Johnson, and there were strange bits and pieces of 'civilisation' scattered about the primitive place, which seemed to indicate that at last one was going south. In the cookhouse someone had painted little bright child-like pictures of steamships; a boy carrying an umbrella was naked except for a piece of blue cloth strung on beads over the genitals and a European schoolboy's belt with a snake clasp which he wore half-way up his torso, between his breasts and navel; and what seemed another scrap of 'civilisation', for sexual inversion is rare among the blacks, a pair of naked 'pansies' stood side by side all day with their arms locked and their hair plaited in ringlets staring at me. Vande got drunk again with palm wine and Amah cut off the top of his finger with one of my swords chopping meat for the carriers' meal. I felt irritated with everyone and everything; I could no longer afford to drink much whisky, for my case was nearly exhausted; I went to bed and lay awake all night because the goats came blundering in, tripping up over our boxes. I was vexed with them in a personal way, as if they could help their stupidity, their clumsiness. I would have exchanged them happily for rats; rats were almost as noisy, but I told myself that there was something purposeful in their noise; they knew what they were doing, but these goats were stupid. . . . I could have cried with exhaustion and anger and want of sleep.

Tapee-Ta

And then, when he came in the morning to wake me, Amedoo said that Laminah was too sick to walk. He had lain awake all night in pain from his gum where the tooth had been drawn. The aspirin I had given him was useless. Now he was getting a little sleep for the first time. This was far more serious than the sickness of a carrier; I had less responsibility for a carrier; he was in his own country if not in his own tribe; but Laminah I had brought from another country, he couldn't be simply jettisoned. But neither could I bear the thought of another day in Greh. I had promised the carriers a rest in Tapee-Ta because that was a large place with a District Commissioner where I could hope to buy fresh fruit, which we were beginning to need badly. Even limes had given out at Sakripie and we had seen no oranges for two weeks, but in that respect Tapee was to disappoint us.

I suggested to Amedoo that Laminah should stay behind for a day and we would wait for him at Tapee-Ta. But Amedoo said that he was afraid of being left. "This is Gio country," Amedoo explained, "they chop people here." So my cousin gave up the hammock to Laminah, who looked half dead when he was laid in it; and I wondered what my conscience would say to me if he died, if my curiosity for new experiences led to the death of someone so charming, so simple, capable of such enjoyment. I was afraid of blood poisoning, but I need not have been frightened. I think it was cowardice Laminah was suffering from, for he recovered very quickly at Tapee.

Three hours through the forest brought us out into a rough road as wide as Oxford Street. Here was an example of what the President had told me of the road-building in the interior. Although the road was too rough for any kind of mechanical transport, it was impressive to see the enormous rampart of trees on either side from which it had been cut.

We were coming in range again of Liberian authority. I had already heard tales of the half-caste Commissioner at Tapee-Ta, and I was anxious to meet him. But I had not foreseen the extent of my good fortune. Colonel Elwood Davis, the leader of the campaign on the Kru Coast, the man responsible for the atrocities described in the British Blue Book, was at Tapee-Ta; I heard his name repeated by passing natives all along the great four-mile stretch of road. His name carried weight; his friends in admiration and his enemies in derision. I discovered later, called him "The Dictator of Grand Bassa".

The road did not stretch as far as Tapee-Ta. After an hour we reached the end, where a gang of naked men was at work felling an enormous silvery cotton tree in the centre of the road. They had dug a trench about three feet deep and squatted in it singing and hacking at the trunk with ordinary bush cutlasses, the rhythm given them by two men with drums. Then there were several more hours of forest path before, in the hottest part of the day, when the sun was directly overhead, we came out of the forest on to a wide exposed road again. The powdered soil was quite white under the sun: it blinded the eyes, even behind smoked glasses.

Amedoo joined me: he had been talking to Mark

and the other carriers, and he was uneasy about the great man at Tapee. He was a wicked man, he said. "Will he make trouble for massa?" I wasn't at all sure that he mightn't. The Liberians were under the impression that I was travelling only in the Western Province, and here I was, a long way to the east, in the Central Province. I had no proper papers: my Liberian visa only gave me permission to land at accredited ports.

I was a little uneasy. I hadn't met Colonel Davis then and I think I pictured him as something rather ferocious in the manner of Emperor Christophe. I couldn't help remembering the Blue Book phrases: the murdered children, the women in the burning huts, Nimley's pathetic dignity, "And when I learnt that Colonel Davis had fought with Tiempoh, who are my children . . ." It certainly did seem to me that there might be trouble.

I was more uneasy still when we came in sight of the District Commissioner's compound (the town of Tapee lay beyond). It was an impressive group of verandahed bungalows behind a stockade with an armed sentry at every gate, and the Liberian flag flying from a staff in the middle. Although it was time for siesta, there seemed to be a lot of movement; many things were going on. From the journalist's point of view, I seemed to have come at a favourable moment, but from the Liberian point of view I couldn't help feeling that I must look very like a spy (the moment was too opportune to be accidental) as I led my odd caravan round the stockade to the main gate.

CHAPTER THREE

THE Dictator OF GRAND BASSA

Black Mercenary

I FELT very dirty as I followed the sentry into the wide clean compound and rather absurd, with my stockings over my ankles, my stained shorts, my too, too British khaki sun helmet. I was very much at a disadvantage, standing beneath a verandah crowded with black gentlemen in the smartest of tropical lounge suits and uniforms. They had just finished lunch and were smoking cigars and drinking coffee: I wondered which was Colonel Davis. There was an air of subdued activity as I stood there in dirty neglect in the sun: clerks kept on delivering messages and running briskly off again, sentries saluted, and the supercilious diplomatic gentlemen leant over the verandah and studied with well-bred curiosity the dusty arrival.

The sentry returned and led me across the compound to another bungalow, a less smart one this time, with a few rickety chairs on the verandah. The District Commissioner appeared in the doorway, a slatternly mulatto woman peered over his shoulder. He was a middle-aged man with a yellow face and Victorian side-whiskers; he hadn't shaved for a long time; his teeth were bad, and he wore a shabby khaki uniform and the dirtiest old peeling white sun helmet I had ever seen. He was like a stern and sadistic papa in a Victorian children's story; his name was Words-

worth, but he was more like Mr. Fairchild than the poet. I think his appearance maligned him and that really he was shy and afraid of humiliation; I think quite possibly, like Mr. Fairchild, he had a heart of gold under that repressive exterior. Now he stood above me like a little yellow tyrant, and I really believed at first that he would refuse me a house, but instead he called his young brother, the Quarter-master.

Mr. Wordsworth, junior, was quite different. He had a round seal-grey face with soft lips (there seemed to be less white blood in his veins) and he had a passion for friendship. He it was who had raised his hat to me at the crossing of path and road at Ganta. He led me to the next bungalow: a palatial building of four rooms and a cookhouse. In one of the rooms we found the Paramount Chief, squatting on the native bed, eating his lunch with the clan chief; he was very like the ex-King of Spain and wore a soft hat and a native robe. We had arrived at Tapee during a conference of the local chiefs. They had made complaints against the District Commissioners, especially against Mr. Wordsworth, and Colonel Davis had arrived as the President's special agent to hear the complaints. There were several D.C.s now staying in the compound. We had arrived in the lunch interval.

I sat down in a wooden chair and waited for the others to arrive. The Paramount Chief hastily came out of the bedroom and said the chair was his. I could sit in it, but it was his. The palaver-house in the compound began to fill up with chiefs who streamed in at the gates in soft hats under umbrellas,

their chairs carried by boys. I began to ask the Paramount Chief to sell me rice for my men. Thin, vital, Bourbon-nosed, he seemed to pay no attention whatever. He strode away to say something to the clan chiefs, then strode back and said I could have rice at four shillings a hamper. I said that was too much, but he was gone again. His mind was full of state affairs, he hardly had time to bring the price down to three shillings, and before I could propose half a crown, he was off to the palaver-house. Then a bugle blew and Colonel Davis, accompanied by the D.C.s, walked across the compound to the council.

Even at a distance there was something attractive about the dictator of Grand Bassa. He had personality. He carried himself with a straight military swagger, he was very well dressed in a tropical suit with a silk handkerchief stuck in the breast pocket. He had a small pointed beard and one couldn't at that distance see the gold teeth which rather weakened his mouth. He was like a young black Captain Kettle and reminded me of Conrad's Mr. J. K. Blunt who used to declare with proud simplicity in the Marseilles cafés, "I live by my sword." He had noted our arrival and presently the seedy Commissioner appeared to say that the President's special agent wished to see our papers.

It was the first time in Liberia that our passports had been examined. The absconding financier whom I have imagined settling in the unpoliced hinterland of Liberia, taking his holidays at will in French Guinea, a good enough substitute for Le Touquet without any tiresome bother about papers, would do well to avoid Tapee-Ta. For there is a prison in the

compound at Tapee-Ta, and though the dictator of Grand Bassa was satisfied with our passports, which certainly did not include permission to pass through Central Liberia, the financier might have fared worse.

That prison, next door to our own bungalow, combined behind its thatch and whitewashed walls and tiny port-holes the sense of darkness and airlessness, and the kind of mindless brutality which sometimes vents itself in this country in the torture of a cat (the head warder was a moron and a cripple). Each port-hole, the size of a man's head, represented a cell. The prisoners within, men and women, were tied by ropes to a stick which was laid crosswise against the port-hole outside. There were two or three men who were driven out to work each morning, two skinny old women who carried in the food and water, their ropes coiled round their waists, an old man who was allowed to lie outside on a mat tied to one of the posts which supported the thatch. In a dark cavernous entrance, where the whitewash stopped, a few warders used to lounge all through the day shouting and squabbling and sometimes diving, club in hand, into one of the tiny cells. The old prisoner was a half-wit; I saw one of the warders beating him with his club to make him move to the tin basin in which he had to wash, but he didn't seem to feel the blows. Life to him was narrowed into a few very simple, very pale sensations, of warmth on his mat in the sun and cold in his cell, for Tapee-Ta at night was very cold. One of the old women had been in prison a month waiting trial. She was accused of having made lightning in her village, and there was a pathetic impotence in her daily purgatory under the stagger-

ing weight of water from the stream half a mile away. If she could make lightning, why did she not burn the prison down or strike the dilatory Commissioner dead? Very likely she had made lightning (I could not disbelieve these stories; they were too well attested), but perhaps the natural force had died in her during her imprisonment, or perhaps she simply hadn't the right medicines with her in that place. I asked the Quartermaster when she would be tried; he didn't know.

The council in the palaver-house went on till after five: the place was packed. It must have been appallingly hot. One suspected that the whole inquiry was designed to quiet the chiefs rather than try the Commissioners, for the judge was a cousin of the principal accused. But at any rate he showed patience and endurance.

Later that evening came the ceremony of lowering the Liberian flag, carried out with solemnity; two buglers played a few bars of the national anthem—

In joy and gladness with our hearts united,
We'll shout the freedom of a land benighted . . .

and everyone on the verandahs stood at attention. When it was over I sent a note across to Colonel Davis asking for an interview and received a reply that he was worn out by nine hours of council, but would spare me a few minutes.

The 'few minutes' developed into several hours, for the Colonel was garrulous, and after more than an hour's conversation on his verandah, we adjourned to mine for whisky. He had once been a private in

the American army and his career, if frankly written, would prove one of the most entertaining adventure stories in the world. As a private or a medical orderly in a black regiment—I forget which—he had served in Pershing's disastrous Mexican expedition when hundreds of men died in the desert for lack of water; later he had seen service in the Philippines; and finally, for what reason I do not know, he had left America and come to Monrovia. He was very soon appointed medical officer of health, though I do not think he had any kind of medical degree, and from this vantage point he had worked his way into politics. Under Mr. King's presidency he had been appointed Colonel Commandant of the Frontier Force and had managed to shift his allegiance to Mr. Barclay when Mr. King was forced to resign after the League of Nations inquiry. No story was undramatic to Colonel Davis, and the whole shabby tale of Mr. King's participation in the shipping of forced labour to Fernando Po and his rather cowardly acceptance of the League's condemnation, which threatened Liberian sovereignty, followed by his resignation when the Legislature proposed to impeach him, became an exciting melodrama in which Colonel Davis had played an heroic part.

"They were thirsting for his blood," Colonel Davis said dramatically, but nothing which I saw later of the coastal Liberians lessened my doubt whether they had the vitality to assault anyone; with cane juice they would work themselves up to a height of oratory, but as for murder . . . He lowered his voice. "For twenty-four hours," he said, "I never left Mr. King's side. The mobs were going about the streets, thirsting

for blood. But they all said, 'We cannot kill King without killing Davis.' " The Colonel flashed his gold teeth at me, deprecatingly. "Of course——"

"Of course," I said.

I approached the subject of the Kru war by way of the Colonel's other military exploits. I felt that after the British Consul's report he might feel shy of the subject, but I always over-estimated the Colonel's shyness. When I expressed my admiration for the way in which he had disarmed the tribes, the Colonel took up the subject with enthusiasm. As far as I could make out the operation had turned on a cup of Ovaltine rather than on rifles or machine-guns, for he was a sweet-tempered man: butter wouldn't have melted between the gold teeth. One tribe had sent out armed men to ambush him, but he had learnt their plans from his spies, had taken a different path and entered the town while it was quite empty except for women and old men. From the report on the Kru war I should have expected Colonel Davis to have set fire to the town while his men raped the women: but no: he called for the oldest man, made him sit down, gave him a glass of Ovaltine (with the barest glance at the opposite verandah, where my whisky and glasses were laid out, the Colonel remarked, "I always have a glass of Ovaltine at the end of a day's trek"), made friends with him, and had him send messages out to the warriors to return in peace. "Of course," the Colonel said, "I made him understand that he and the other old men would have to remain as my guests until the arms were handed over . . ."

The character of the Colonel eluded me. Lord Cecil in the House of Lords had called him a

'buccaneer', but that was perhaps pardonable exaggeration. He was obviously a man of great ability; his disarming of the tribes testified to it, and that he had courage as well as brag the whole Kru story showed. I had not only his own word for it: the fact emerged even from the unfriendly report of the British Consul. He had come down into Chief Nimley's district as the President's special agent, under a guard of soldiers, to collect long overdue taxes. He knew well the man he had to deal with and he knew the risk he was running when he agreed to meet him at a palaver in the village. It had been agreed that neither should bring armed men, but when Davis arrived at the palaver-house with his clerk he found Nimley and his leading men sitting there fully armed. Even then, Davis thought, all would have gone well had not the Commander of the Frontier Force, Major Grant, who had taken a stroll round the village, rushed into the hut, interrupted the palaver, and cried out that Nimley had armed men concealed in the banana plantations. Davis commanded him to stay where he was, but Grant, crying out that he was responsible to the President for Davis's safety, ran from the hut to summon his soldiers.

Davis's later opinion was that Grant was in the pay of the Krus, for his action had the immediate effect of endangering Davis's life. Nimley left the hut and his warriors swarmed round the Colonel. Naturally he made the most of the situation to me, as he leant there over the Tapee verandah with one eye on the drinks. ("I said to my clerk, 'Take the papers. They won't harm you. Walk slowly up to the camp and

stop the soldiers from coming here.' I stood with my back to the wall and they flourished their spears in my face. My clerk said, 'Colonel, I will not leave you. I will die here with you.' I said to him, 'There is no point in dying. Obey orders.'") But the facts were undisputed. He had been a prisoner and he had escaped. He said that when his clerk had gone, he left the wall and walked very slowly to the door. They made gestures of stabbing, but no one would stab first. Then an old man appeared with a great staff and beat them back and cleared a way for Davis through the village. "Afterwards Nimley killed the old man."

His cook appeared on the verandah behind us and said that dinner was served, but the Colonel wouldn't let me go: he had an audience for a story which had probably become rather stale on the Coast.

"That night I was sitting on my verandah, as it might be to-night; it was ten o'clock, and there, just where the sentry is, I saw a big warrior dressed in war paint with little bells tied under his knees. He came up and said, 'Who's the big man around here?' I said, 'I guess I'm the biggest man here. What do you want?' He said, 'Chief Nimley send me to tell you he's coming up here at five o'clock in the morning to collect his tax money.' So I said, 'You tell Chief Nimley that I'll be waiting for him.'

"And at eleven o'clock I looked up and there was another warrior, a small man, all in war paint. He came up to the verandah and said, 'Are you the big man here?' 'Waal,' I said, 'I guess you won't find anyone bigger around this place. What do you want?' He said, 'Chief Nimley send me to tell you

that at five o'clock he come to see if he's a man or you are a man.' So I said, 'You go back to Chief Nimley and tell him if he comes up here at five o'clock, I'll show him which is the man.'

"And at midnight I looked up and there was a little piccaninny in Boy Scout uniform, but all dressed in war paint. He came up to the verandah and he said, 'Where's the big man?' So I said, 'Are you a Boy Scout?' and he said, 'Yes'. I said, 'Who's your National Director of Boy Scouts?' He said, 'Colonel Elwood Davis.' I said, 'Where's Colonel Davis now?' and he said, 'In Monrovia.' 'No,' I said, 'I'm Colonel Davis. Now what do you mean by appearing before your National Director of Boy Scouts in war paint?' So he got kind of shy and said, 'Chief Nimley told me to come up here.' I said, 'You go back to Chief Nimley and say I wouldn't let a Boy Scout deliver a message like that.'"

That seemed to be the end of the story. I said, "And did Chief Nimley come?"

"Oh no," Colonel Davis said, "he just made lightning. But there were a lot of Buzie men in the camp, members of the Lightning Society, and they laid out their medicines and the lightning hit the trees on the beach and didn't do any harm."

He brought up the subject of the British Consul's report himself. He said what had gone most to his heart in a very unfair document was the story that six children had been burnt alive. There was no one who loved children more than he did. He had piccaninnies of his own, and I had only to ask his wife, his second wife, whether every night he didn't read them stories before they went to bed. His

enemies in Monrovia, who were jealous of his position, had pretended to believe in these atrocities, and even his mother, back in America, had read about them; but she knew him better, she'd dandled him on her knee, and she didn't believe. Colonel Davis said, "If you want to know the truth of that story——"

Apparently one evening he had heard children crying and had sent soldiers from the camp who found two babies in the swamps. They had been hidden there when Nimley's tribe took to the bush. The next day he sent more soldiers to search the neighbourhood, and they brought in four more children. He was a mother to those children. He had made the soldiers wash them, had given up his own porridge and the last of his own vaseline; then next day he had sent men to capture a few women to look after them. These were the very children he had been accused of having burnt alive.

His cook again appeared and said that chop was getting cold. Davis snapped at him, but he had no control over his servants. He was very smart, very astute, but I think it was this which was wrong with him. He came over to my verandah and drank whisky and told us all about his first marriage to a teetotaller and how he had cured her by guile of her prejudice, and his servant kept on popping up at intervals to remind him of chop, while Davis stubbornly sat on, just to show who was master.

It is the simplest explanation of the facts contained in Blue Book, cmd. 4614: the woman just delivered of twins shot in her bed and her children burnt; children cut down with cutlasses; the heads and

limbs of victims carried on poles; for otherwise Colonel Davis has to be pictured as a monster, and a monster one simply couldn't believe him to be, as he flashed his gold teeth over the whisky, a bit doggish, a bit charmingly and consciously shy and small boy in the manner of the black singer Hutch.

He came across again the next evening for whisky and nearly finished all we had. It was a bitterly cold night, and a heavy storm came up: there could be no doubt that the rains were on us. After an hour or two the Colonel grew sentimental, leaning back in his chair with a wistful misunderstood air; and it became difficult to believe that he had even so much as witnessed the atrocities. "I was on a liner once," the Colonel said, "and I remember the Captain calling me up to the bridge after dinner. He made a remark I have never forgotten. He pointed to a boat that was going by and said it reminded him of three books that were in the library down below: *Ships that Pass in the Night*—can you guess the others?"

We couldn't.

"Well, the Captain pointed down at the deck where the other passengers were and said to me, 'There, Davis: *The People We Meet*'; and then he turned to me and said, 'But more important still, Davis, *The Friends We Love*.'"

I filled the dictator's glass. "It was a beautiful thought," he said, looking away.

I worked the conversation back to Liberia and politics. Colonel Davis was North American by birth, but he was a Liberian patriot. "As the poet wrote," Colonel Davis said, "Is there a man with

soul so dead, Who never has said, I love my own, my own country?' " I asked him about Mr. Barclay and his chances, and whether Mr. Faulkner would be opposing him as well as Mr. King. No, he said, Mr. Faulkner had retired from politics. He had seen Mr. Faulkner in the Post Office just before leaving Monrovia and Faulkner had told him that he was neither supporting nor opposing either candidate. "So I said to him, 'Mr. Faulkner, there is a parable in the Bible. A disciple came to Christ and said, 'One in the next village is casting out devils in Beelzebub's name,' and Christ said, 'Who is not with me is against me.' " My ignorance of Monrovia contributed to the drama of the political scene: I couldn't tell that the Post Office was a loft in a wooden shed to which one climbed by a ladder.

Victorian Sunday

I woke next morning with a bad cold after spending the night under two blankets with a sweater over my pyjamas. A letter was waiting for me at breakfast from the Quartermaster:

Dear Friend Mr. Green: Good morning. I'm about to ask a favour of you this morning which I hope you will be able to grant. If you have any Brandy kindly send me a little or anything else if Brandy is out. Some would be very appreciated by me. I'm feeling very, very cold this a.m. you know hope you both well. With best wishes for health. Your friend Wordsworth. Q.M.

N.B.—I'll bring my sisters to pay a visit to you

and cousin this p.m. as they like you for their friends.

I sent him a glass of whisky and asked for a coconut and some palm nuts which the cook needed for lard. Presently back came a coconut and a bottle of palm oil and a note:

Dear Friend: Too many thanks for such a kind treat this a.m. it was highly appreciated. I shall always regard you as my friend. . . .

The place was very still: it was Sunday and a heavy Victorian peace settled over Tapee. Even native dances were forbidden. The prisoners were driven out to wash tied together by ropes, and a gramophone from the bungalow where two D.C.s were staying played hymn-tunes across the hot empty compound: *Hark, the herald angels sing* and *Nearer, my God, to Thee*. But after a while these gave place to dance music and American hot songs. I went for a walk; I was feeling ill and homesick; the Coast seemed as far away as ever. I felt crazy to be here in the middle of Liberia when everything I knew intimately was European. It was like a bad dream. I couldn't remember why I had come. I wanted to be away at once, but I simply hadn't the strength, and Dr. Harley's warning against walking any distance in the West African climate weighed on my mind. I *had* to have these days of rest, and so did the boys. Mark was dead tired, and even the nerves of Amedoo and Laminah were strained. I tried to comfort myself with the thought that it was only six days to Grand Bassa and if Colonel Davis were to be believed

we should not have to wait longer than a week at that miserable little port before a boat passed.

While I was having a bath in preparation for a long siesta the Quartermaster arrived. He wanted to buy a bottle of whisky for his brother and his brother had sent five shillings. I said I had none left, or at any rate only just enough to see me to the Coast. Then at two-thirty by my watch, when I had just fallen asleep, he came again with a note from the D.C. inviting me to dinner at two o'clock. I had eaten a large lunch already, but I went, taking with me half a bottle of whisky very diluted.

I was reminded of one of those curious thick crude groups by Samuel Butler. One had slipped back sixty years in time to a Victorian Sunday dinner. The only thing lacking was the wife; she helped to serve the dinner. There at the end of the table sat Papa, yellow-faced Wordsworth in his heavy side-whiskers dressed in a thick dark Sunday suit with a gold watch-chain across his stomach and a gold seal dangling from it. On the walls were faded Victorian photographs of family groups, whiskers and bustles and parasols, in Oxford frames. All except myself and Colonel Davis, who sat at the other end of the table and carved the goose, were in Sunday clothes: an old negro who had withered inside his clothes like a dried nut in its shell and who was one of the Judges of Assize, the native Commissioner from Grand Bassa and another Commissioner who was very shy and scared of Colonel Davis and whom I suspected of having played the hymns. The Commissioner of Grand Bassa, I suppose, was responsible for the hot music.

Conversation was halting: the weather, devils and secret societies, the small talk of Liberia. Colonel Davis was a firm believer in the power of the lightning societies. He had visited towns where the members had performed in his honour. They would tell him that lightning would be made at a certain hour, and at that hour out of a cloudless sky along all the hills for miles around it would begin to play. Mr. Justice Page capped the story with a few legal decisions of his own on the subject of lightning-makers, but Colonel Davis was determined to raise the conversation to a high social level: to food. He had toured Europe with Mr. King and he remembered very well the caviare.

Colonel Davis explained to the dark blank faces, "Caviare is the black eggs of little fishes." He turned to me, "Of course, in England now, you no longer get the Russian cigarette." I said I really didn't know: I thought I'd seen them in tobacconists'. "Not real ones," Colonel Davis said, "they are very rare indeed. A season or two ago in Monrovia they formed a course in themselves at dinner parties."

"Where did the course come?" I asked.

"After the fish and before the salad," Colonel Davis said, while the Commissioner from Grand Bassa leant forward and drank in every syllable describing the gilded life of the capital. "The lights were lowered," he paused impressively, "and one cigarette would be served to each guest." The judge nodded; he came from Monrovia as well.

I remember saying to Colonel Davis how surprised I was not to have seen a single mosquito. He, too, he said, had not seen one since the last rains; he was

suffering a little from prickly heat, but Liberia was really the healthiest place in Africa.

He was always inclined to over-state his case, as when he told me that in the Kru war no women had been killed, only one woman accidentally wounded, while the British Consul's report spoke of seventy-two women and children dead. Now he remarked that there had never been any yellow fever in Liberia; the manager of the British bank who had died of it in Monrovia (his death was one of the reasons why the British Bank of West Africa withdrew altogether from Liberia) had brought the infection with him from Lagos. All the other deaths could be traced to inoculation. There was less malaria, he went on, in Liberia than in any other part of the West Coast: I had seen myself, he said, that there were no mosquitoes. But providence gave Colonel Davis a raw deal in this case because, when evening came and we were waiting for him to join us over our whisky, the Quartermaster brought news that he was down with a bad attack of fever.

So the Quartermaster entertained us our last evening in Tapee-Ta, sitting moonily opposite with his great seal's eyes begging, begging all the time for friendship. He had taken an immediate fancy to me, he said, when he saw me come out of the French path by Ganta; he had felt then that we would be friends. He would write to me and I would write to him. It was lonely in Tapee: he was used to the life of the capital; in Monrovia it was so gay, the dancing and the cafés on the beach. By the time we arrived the Season would be over, but it would still be gay, so much to do and see, dancing by moonlight. . . . His

great lustrous romantic eyes never left me. He said, because his mind was full of love and friendship, dancing and the moon, "You've come from Buzie country. They have wonderful medicines there. There is a medicine for venereal disease. You tie a rope round your waist. I have never tried it." He said wistfully, "I guess you white people aren't troubled with venereal disease." He brooded a long time on our departure. He wished he was coming too, but he would always be my friend. He would have letters from me. That night when I was making my way out of the compound into the forest he intercepted me. He said he hoped I wouldn't mind his stopping me, but there was a very good closet behind the Colonel's bungalow with a wooden seat. It was more suitable for me than the bush, he said, but I couldn't help remembering that he had not yet tried the Buzie medicine and I went inexorably on into the forest. He got up very early next morning to see us go, and the last I remember of Tapee was his warm damp romantic handshake in the grey deserted compound.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LAST LAP

A Touch of Fever

I HAD never imagined that Grand Bassa would one day become my ideal of a place to sleep and rest in. But now it seemed like heaven. There would be

another white man there; the sea in front instead of bush; there might be beer to drink. I hadn't realised until I began to walk again how down-and-out I was. No amount of Epsom salts had any effect on me; I used to take a handful morning and night in hot tea, but I might have been taking sugar. I felt sick and tired before I had walked a step and now there was no hammock I could use. Six days, they had said at Ganta, would bring us from Tapee to Grand Bassa, but now at Tapee they said that the journey would take a week at the very least, perhaps ten days. I could no longer count time in such long periods: even four days might have been eternity for all my mind was capable of conceiving it. Not until I could say "to-morrow" would I believe that we were really drawing nearer to the Coast. My brain felt as sick as my body. The responsibility of the journey had been mine, the choice of route, the care of the men, and now my mind had almost ceased to function. I simply couldn't believe that we should ever reach Grand Bassa, that I had ever led a life different from this life.

To reach our next stop, Zigi's Town, I found difficult enough. It was nearly nine hours' solid trek from Tapee, going down all the while into a damper closer heat, and the first few miles of path were flooded waist-high. Our guide, whom the Commissioner of Grand Bassa had lent to lead us to the door of the P.Z. store on Bassa beach, proved useless from the start. Dressed in a ragged blue uniform, a rifle over his shoulder which wouldn't have fired even if he'd had the rounds, with all his belongings in a little tin pail, he dropped behind at the first village we reached. He

was called Tommie and he had a brazen boyish charm. He knew the way, but he had no intention of walking at *our* rate. He started each day well, but after half an hour he would slip aside into the bush and not catch up again until the midday halt. By that time he was usually a little drunk. Because he wore a uniform he could rob any village he passed of palm wine, fruit and vegetables.

I remember nothing of the trek to Zigi's Town and very little of the succeeding days. I was so exhausted that I couldn't write more than a few lines in my diary; I hope never to be so tired again. I retain an impression of continuous forest, occasional hills emerging above the bush so that we could catch a glimpse on either side of the great whalebacked forests driving to the sea. Outside Zigi's Town there was a stream trickling down the slope and a few ducks with a curiously English air about them. I remember trying to sit down, but immediately having to deal with the town chief over food for the carriers, trying to sit down again and rising to look for threepenny-bits the cook needed for buying a chicken, trying to sit down and being forced up again to dress a carrier's sores. I couldn't stand any more of it; I swallowed two tablespoonfuls of Epsom in a cup of strong tea (we had finished our tinned milk long ago) and left my cousin to deal with anything else that turned up. My temperature was high. I swallowed twenty grains of quinine with a glass of whisky, took off my clothes, wrapped myself in blankets under the mosquito-net and tried to sleep.

A thunderstorm came up. It was the third storm we'd had in a few days; there wasn't any time to lose

if we were to reach the Coast, and I lay in the dark as scared as I have ever been. There were no rats, at any rate, but I caught a jigger under my toe when I crawled out to dry myself. I was sweating as if I had influenza; I couldn't keep dry for more than fifteen seconds. The hurricane lamp I left burning low on an up-ended chop box and beside it an old whisky bottle full of warm filtered water. I kept remembering Van Gogh at Bolahun burnt out with fever. He said you had to lie up for at least a week: there wasn't any danger in malaria if you lay up long enough; but I couldn't bear the thought of staying a week here, another seven days away from Grand Bassa. Malaria or not, I'd got to go on next day and I was afraid.

The fever would not let me sleep at all, but by the early morning it was sweated out of me. My temperature was a long way below normal, but the worst boredom of the trek for the time being was over. I had made a discovery during the night which interested me. I had discovered in myself a passionate interest in living. I had always assumed before, as a matter of course, that death was desirable.

It seemed that night an important discovery. It was like a conversion, and I had never experienced a conversion before. (I had not been converted to a religious faith. I had been convinced by specific arguments in the probability of its creed.) If the experience had not been so new to me, it would have seemed less important, I should have known that conversions don't last, or if they last at all it is only as a little sediment at the bottom of the brain. Perhaps the sediment has value, the memory of a conversion may have some force in an emergency; I may

be able to strengthen myself with the intellectual idea that once in Zigi's Town I had been completely convinced of the beauty and desirability of the mere act of living.

The Edge of 'Civilisation'

It was supposed to be a seven-hour trek from Zigi's Town to Bassa Town, the first stop inside Bassa territory. I was doubtful if I could make it without some help from a hammock, so I took on two extra carriers and my men hacked a pole to take the place of the one I had discarded. I was feeling very weak, but I hadn't enough carriers to let myself be carried all the way, so I walked the first two hours and then had ten minutes in the hammock and walked again. I didn't like being carried. A two-man hammock puts a great strain on the carriers and my men were already tired by the long trek. One heard the hammock strings grinding on the pole and saw the shoulder muscles strain under the weight. It was too close to using men as animals for me to be happy.

The villages we passed were all deserted except for a few women. An elephant had been killed somewhere in the bush, I suppose with the poisoned spears the natives in these parts shoot from ancient guns, and all the men for miles around had gathered to strip its flesh. To our surprise we arrived, in less than four hours, at Bassa Town. I was glad, save that it made the Coast seem farther away than ever. We were two days now from Tapee, but the young native sub-Commissioner here still spoke of Grand Bassa as seven days away. He was the only man in the place,

a new village built of square low huts; all the others were off after the elephant, so I was a little afraid of what my carriers might do in a town deserted of its menfolk.

But I couldn't be bothered. As soon as I'd eaten some lunch I went to bed and sweated again between the blankets, for the fever had returned. The huts were too low for me to stand upright, and instead of rats there were huge spiders everywhere. I had just enough energy to note depressingly in my diary: "Last tin of biscuits, last tin of butter, last piece of bread." It was astonishing how important these luxuries had become; there were ten biscuits each, we separated them in the tin and rationed them each in our own way, but the butter proved to be rancid and had to be used for cooking.

I noted, too, a sign that we were meeting the edge of civilisation pushing up from the Coast. A young girl hung around all day posturing with her thighs and hips, suggestively, like a tart. Naked to the waist, she was conscious of her nakedness; she knew that breasts had a significance to the white man they didn't have to the native. There couldn't be any doubt that she had known whites before. There were other signs too: the scarcity of food and the high price of rice. It would be higher still, the sub-Commissioner said, when we got nearer to Grand Bassa. He wanted me to buy a couple of hampers in Bassa Town and so save perhaps sixpence on each hamper. There are limitations to native mathematics, and Laminah could never understand why I refused, why it would cost more to save a shilling on rice and employ two extra men to carry it.

That day was the last short trek on the way to the Coast. There was no longer any talk of 'too far'. The carriers longed as much as I did to escape from the bush and reach the sea, and as for my poor servants, they were dog-tired. Their nerves were on edge and one evening Amedoo and the head carrier came to blows in front of me over a dish of dirty meat scraps. It was February the twenty-seventh when we left Bassa Town, and we had been walking since February the third. An eight-hour march brought us to Gyon, but it did not seem to bring us any closer to Grand Bassa. That remained, according to rumour, a week away. It still seemed impossible to me that we should ever reach it. My fever did not return after Bassa Town, but my temperature remained a long way below normal.

The vitality of both of us reached the lowest ebb that day and the next. We had to be very careful all the time not to quarrel. We only saw each other for an hour or two at the end of the day, but even then it was not easy to avoid subjects on which we might disagree. The range of such subjects, indeed, had become almost as wide as life itself. At first it was enough to avoid politics of any kind, but now we were capable of quarrelling over the merits of tea. The only thing was to remain silent, but there was always danger that silence might strike one of us as sullenness. My nerves were the worst affected and it was to my cousin's credit that we never let our irritation with each other out into words.

Gyon was an empty inhospitable place of square dirty huts painted on the outside with white splashes on a kind of liver-brown mud. Some association in a

tired brain with the plague-marked houses in Stuart London made me think the place unhealthy, and it was one of the curious results of complete exhaustion that the mind couldn't separate fantasy from reality. The place was only empty because all the men were away on their farms except the headman, who would do as little for us as he could, but to this day I find it hard to realise that the village was not emptied by disease.

We had to sit on our boxes for more than three hours before the men returned and we could find huts for ourselves. As for my servants, I could find nothing for them; they had to sleep in the open cookhouse round their fire, and they got little sleep, for they were afraid of wild beasts, particularly of elephants and leopards. We were in leopard country, every road into Tapee had been guarded by a trap, wooden boxes in which a kid could be tied with a drop-door weighted with bundles of shells.

There was no longer enough whisky for sun-downers and we rationed the last half-bottle in teaspoonfulls, which we drank in our tea. As we ate our supper some kind of trial was being held by the carriers in front of Amedoo as judge. They sat before him in two long lines and each witness in turn stated his case with the gestures and intonations of accomplished orators. It was still going on when I went to bed at eight, and I learned the next day from Mark that the trial was not over till midnight.

I never properly knew what it was all about, but early next morning Kolieva, who had once been my favourite hammock-man with Babu, came to me as I sat in the village kitchen waiting for breakfast and

wondering whether I could stand another long trek (my shoes had given way, the soles had worn evenly down until they were as thin as tissue-paper, and then they simply disappeared. I had only left a pair of gym shoes with crêpe soles). I couldn't understand what he said to me; the other carriers clustered round; it was obvious that a Court of Appeal was supposed to be sitting. Amedoo explained, but I'm not sure that I understood him correctly.

One of the carriers who was called Bukkai had left something behind at the spot where we stopped for lunch. It had been taken by Fadai, the thin emaciated boy with lovely eyes and venereal disease who called himself a British subject because he had been born in Sierra Leone. When Bukkai accused Fadai of the theft and threatened to bring the case to trial, Fadai was quite ready to return whatever it was (I think it was a needle and cotton) rather than make trouble, but Kolieva, taking him down to the stream below the village, had extorted money from him by threats and by promising to bear false witness on his behalf. The trial took place, but Kolieva remained silent and Fadai told the whole story. Then Kolieva became the accused, and to bear false witness in their eyes was a more serious offence than to steal. He was found guilty and fined four shillings by Amedoo, a very large sum representing nearly ten days' wages. As I was uncertain whether I understood the facts, and as I knew how reliable Amedoo was and the sentence seemed popular, I said, "I agree," and because Kolieva would have argued it, the absurd imperial phrase, which never failed to silence them, "Palaver finished". At first Kolieva declared that he

would come no farther and demanded his pay, but the thought of the long trek alone through strange tribes daunted him.

The Detective of Darndo

That day was another long trek, nearly eight hours of it. Our guide slipped behind at the first village we reached; and I could feel every root and stone through my gym shoes. The carriers whom we had taken on at Bassa Town and who had asked to come with us failed half-way and I couldn't use my hammock at all. It was typical of the Bassa tribe to promise and then to fail. I developed a bitter dislike of the very appearance of Bassa men, the large well-covered bodies, the round heads, the soft effeminate eyes. The Coast had corrupted them, had made them liars, swindlers, lazy, weak, completely undependable. But it was from the Bassa tribe, and from the Vais, whose territory, too, touched the decadent seaboard, that the governing class recruits new members. To the criticism that the native has no hand in the administration, the Americo-Liberian will point to Bassa and Vai men in the Government departments, Bassa and Vai Commissioners and clerks.*

I shall call the next village we stayed in Darndo. It sounded like Darndo, and it is marked on no map. I reached it with one or two carriers a long way ahead of the others. In a small square hut with a verandah draped with the Liberian flag, a number of elderly

* It is the pride of the Vai people that they have the only written language in Africa, but the Bassa are imitating them, and I found a piece of their script stuck, perhaps as a charm in the roof of my hut.

natives were sitting with a half-caste. He was dressed in dirty pyjamas, he had a yellow face, a few decaying teeth, a glass eye; he was one of the ugliest men I met in Liberia, but there is no one there for whom I feel now a greater affection. He gave me a chair, he brought me the first fresh fruit I had seen for weeks, large bitter oranges and limes; he arranged a hut for me, and he expected no return.

He was an absurd and a heroic figure. He said to me, "You are a missionary, of course?" and when I said "No," he fixed me with his one eye, while the other raked the glaring afternoon sky above the dirty huts. He said, "I believe you to be a member of the Royal Family." I asked him why he believed that. "Ah," he said, "it is my business. You see I am a detective." But he had run completely out of paper; there was none to be got nearer than the Coast; and when I gave him a dozen pages out of my notebook, he was embarrassingly grateful. I thought he was going to weep from his single eye, and he disappeared at once into his hut to write a report that a member of the British Royal Family was wandering through the interior of the Republic.

But I have said he was heroic. Like Mr. Nelson he was a tax-gatherer. He belonged to the Coast, to the caf  s of Mr. Wordsworth's dreams, and here he was stuck away in a tiny village of a strange tribe. Like Mr. Nelson he was unpaid, he had to live on what the natives gave him, but unlike Mr. Nelson he gave something in return. They trusted him and he defended them as far as he could, with what vitality was left in his fever-drained body, from the exactions of the uniformed messengers who streamed back and

forth between Tapee and the Coast. It needed courage and it needed tact.

I think his kindness saved us both that day from complete collapse, that and the news he gave us that there was a road for twelve miles out of Grand Bassa to a place called Harlingsville and that a Dutch company in the port possessed a motor lorry, for that might easily shorten the distance by a day. With the dark another storm came up, rumbling over the hills between us and Tapee. A miserable man dragged himself over to my hut across the coffee beans which were lying in the dust to dry. He asked me whether I was a doctor and I said that I had a few medicines, but when he told me it was gonorrhœa he suffered from, I had to admit that nothing I had with me would help him. The information took a long time to penetrate. The sight of a white man had made him hope; he just stood there waiting for the magic pill, the magic ointment, then moved dispiritedly away to sit in his own hut and wait for another miracle.

That night I couldn't eat my food, I felt sick as well as exhausted, and a new fear had been put in my mind by Souri, the cook, who, when he had seen me eating the half-caste's oranges, had taken them away from me. He said these bitter oranges were not fit to eat, they would make a white man ill, and I remembered how I had been warned against over-ripe fruit by Dr. Harley at Ganta, so that now the fear of dysentery was added to the fear of fever as I lay awake too tired to sleep and the rain came down in a solid wall of water over Darndo.

I didn't believe that I should be able to walk a step

next day, and so I asked the detective to get me six extra carriers. By that means I thought I should be able to use the hammock continuously next day without tiring my own men, who had the long trek behind them. But in the morning I felt better and rather than delay while men were fetched from the farm accepted two carriers only, one a typical Bassa, tall, boasting, fleshy, with the usual false boyish sullenness. The detective was very proud of him, calling him Samson and boasting of his strength, but long before King Peter's Town Samson was the last carrier, holding up the whole train, grumbling at the weight of his load.

We were aiming at King Peter's Town and Grand Bassa was still something to be hardly hoped for, in the vague future, when suddenly at lunch-time from a friendly village chief I heard that it was close, that with the help of the lorry from Harlingsville it was only one day's march from King Peter's Town. The news spread to the boys, to the carriers. We sat and grinned at each other, blacks and whites, closer in this happiness than we had been all through the trek; in our relief of spirit there was no longer any need to control the temper, one could curse and quarrel as well as laugh, and to the carriers' joy I broke out at the hated Tommie with a flow of obscenity I hadn't known was at my command. This was the greatest happiness of all: to feel that restraint was no longer necessary. Rashly I told the boys about the lorry that I would get to meet us at Harlingsville and soon every carrier knew of it; they had never seen a car, but they knew what it meant, twelve blessed miles without loads, without effort.

It was a seven and a half hours' trek to King Peter's Town and a shabby village at the end of it, but we were happier than we had been since we left Bolahun. I scribbled a note in pencil to the manager of the P.Z. store announcing our arrival and asking him to send the lorry up to the end of the road to meet us, and not even the warnings of the three extra Bassa carriers I hired for the next day that Harlingsville was "too far, too far," that it was a twelve-hour trek, depressed me. I pretended for the sake of my own men to disbelieve them, but secretly I put my watch back a couple of hours, determined that even if it were a twelve-hour trek, we should yet do it and sleep in Grand Bassa. The messenger stuck the note into a cleft stick and with some of our last oil in his lamp set off to walk to Grand Bassa all night through the forest. I remember a whistle blowing among the shabby huts as Tommie marshalled a few ragged uniformed messengers with rifles as useless as his own before a flagstaff in the centre of the village and the Liberian flag waved up and down again while Tommie tried to make his awkward squad stand at the 'present'. But they laughed at him and someone stole his whistle, and all that evening Tommie went glowering up and down the village looking for it.

Grand Bassa

We rose at four-fifteen, but the new carriers and Tommie delayed us and we did not leave King Peter's Town till six. I wasn't quite so cheerful then, the Bassa men persisted that it was twelve hours to

Harlingsville, five hours first to a Seventh Day Adventist mission, where they wanted us to spend the night. But the smash-and-grab raid was nearly over; it was only later that I could separate the physical tiredness which was caused by the long fast trek from the actual circumstances of the primitive life; I thought then that it was the interior I was weary of, when it was only the march, the forest, the inadequate resources of my own brain. I wasn't going to waste another day in the interior if we had to walk the clock round to avoid it. As it might be a very long trek I avoided using the hammock until the very end, though if it hadn't been for the strain on the carriers, there would have been an almost unalloyed delight in the swinging motion and the long stare upwards, the sight of the blue cracks moving through the great fan of leaves between the tapering grey boles, the sense of being carried south with no more exertion, back to the life I began to think I cared for more than I had known.

To my relief the Bassa men proved, as usual, to be liars. The first of us reached the mission after only three and a half hours. It was a Saturday and a bell was ringing for church in a cluster of white buildings on a hill-top. The missionary came down to the path and brought us in, a German living there with his wife, trying to convert the Bassa tribe to a belief in the millennium and the sacred distinction between the Sabbath and the Sunday. They fed us on real German ginger cake and gave us iced grape juice to drink, and talked about wireless sets in throaty English, and the touch of iced drink on the lips was like the end of everything, so that already I began

to look back on Kpangblamai and Nicoboozu as something gone out of my life for ever. Grand Bassa, they said, was only eight hours away and Harlingsville six hours, but when I mentioned the lorry that I hoped would meet us there, they had bad news. There was only one car in Grand Bassa and that had broken down some months before, and they doubted whether it had been repaired. I wished then that I had not told my servants and the carriers of the lorry. The thought that when I got them to Harlingsville they would still be faced with another two hours' trek worried me as much as the growing suspicion that another eight hours of walking would be too much for me.

We came out of the forest altogether a few hours later on to a broad grassy path across long rolling downs, which seemed to indicate the sea was near. We had been in the forest now almost uninterruptedly since the day we crossed the border on the other side of Liberia. It was like breathing again to leave it. At every crest now we hoped to see the Atlantic. After lunch Tommie overtook us, tipsy and singing some unintelligible song the carriers took up and handed down their line till it faded over the crests. That encouraged me, for if Harlingsville was far off, our guide would have stayed behind to drink and rob. More and more people came up the path from the direction of the sea, and of each Tommie asked if there was a car in Harlingsville, but they all said there was no car. We passed an unfinished concrete bridge marking where the road had once reached, for *this* road had gone backward. Then a few seedy houses appeared, definitely houses now and

not huts, with a first floor and tin roofs but without glass in the windows, with the air of old-fashioned chicken coops magnified to take men. Through a window I saw a group of half-castes playing cards round a bottle of cane juice. It was the familiar Africa of the films, of semi-Parisian revues and Leicester Square. Sometimes there were chickens or a goat or an allotment. This was civilisation; we had seen it last in Freetown.

And then at three o'clock unexpectedly we were in Harlingsville, the wooden houses rising to two floors, with outside staircases, a smell of human ordure drawn up by the sun, a Post Office marked in chalk letters, men and women in trousers and shirts leaning over fences, and as the path bent, there at the beginning of a wider road a motor-lorry stood. I wanted to laugh and shout and cry; it was the end, the end of the worst boredom I had ever experienced, the worst fear and the worst exhaustion. If I had not been so tired (it was March the second, we had been walking for exactly four weeks and covered about three hundred and fifty miles), civilisation might not have seemed quite so desirable in comparison with what I was leaving: the complete simplicity on the edge of subsistence, the little groves of rice-birds, the graves of the chiefs, the tiny fires at sundown, the torchlight, the devils and the dancing. But civilisation, for the moment, I was ready to swallow whole, even the tin roofs, the stinking lurching lorry from which the natives on the way from market in Grand Bassa drew back with the same dread as their fellows had shown on the road to Kailahun, hiding their faces against the banks as the monstrosity ground by. The

journey had begun and ended in a lorry in the stink of petrol.

Civilisation, of course, even at the Grand Bassa level, offered a little more than that; it offered iced beer in the home of the P.Z. manager over the store which was just closing down from want of trade, fresh Liberian beef of unbelievable toughness, a straggling row of wooden houses ending on the clean wide beach with the surf breaking beyond, for the surf had saved Grand Bassa, like all other Liberian trading stations, from quays and docks; it offered a selection of hideous churches, one of which woke me early next morning with the sound of what must have been a gramophone record, repeating over and over again, "Come to church. Come to church. Come to church."

It offered, too, a wooden police station with a little group of uniformed figures avidly watching my carriers collect in the courtyard of the store to be paid off. In a way I was glad to see the last of them, but as I listened to the manager warning them to be gone as quickly as possible from Grand Bassa, for the police would be after their money, I felt sorry for the end of something which was unlikely ever to happen again. One was never likely to live for long in a company so simple and uncorrupted; they had none of them before seen so many stores, the sea, a motor-lorry; their eyes were full of excitement and wonder at Grand Bassa, and they didn't even know the way back. Nobody here could tell them, and when Vande suggested that they might make their way along the beach to Monrovia and there get in touch again with the Holy Cross Mission, the manager warned them that none of his own men

went that way unless they carried guns. The beach is the most dangerous road in all Liberia to travellers, because its people have been touched by civilisation, have learnt to steal and lie and kill.

They drifted away out of the courtyard one by one, with nothing to do, conscious of their native clothes among the trousered Bassa. They didn't take the warning to get clear away out of town with their money, for that night I lay in bed listening to the drunken singing and shouts of Vande and Amah under the wall. Cane juice was the only cheap thing in Grand Bassa, and I could tell the difference between their drunkenness now and the happy sleepy mellow state the palm wine had put them in. This was crude spirit and a crude coastal drunkenness.

The Seedy Level

One was back, or, if you will, one had advanced again, to the seedy level. This journey, if it had done nothing else, had reinforced a sense of disappointment with what man had made out of the primitive, what he had made out of childhood. Oh, one wanted to protest, one doesn't believe, of course, in 'the visionary gleam', in the trailing glory, but there was something in that early terror and the bareness of one's needs, a harp strumming behind a hut, a witch on the nursery landing, a handful of kola nuts, a masked dancer, the poisoned flowers. The sense of taste was finer, the sense of pleasure keener, the sense of terror deeper and purer. It isn't a gain to have turned the witch or the masked secret dancer, the sense of supernatural evil, into the small human

viciousness of the thin distinguished military grey head in Kensington Gardens with the soft lips and the eye which dwelt with dull lustre on girls and boys of a certain age.

He was an Old Etonian. He had an estate in the Highlands. He said, "Do they cane at your school?" looking out over the wide flat grass, the nursemaids and the children, with furtive alertness. He said, "You must come up and stay with me in Scotland. Do you know of any girls' school where they still—you know——" He began to make confidences, and then, suddenly taking a grip of the poor sliding brain, he rose and moved away with stiff military back, the Old Etonian tie, the iron-grey hair, a bachelor belonging to the right clubs, over the green plain among the nursemaids and the babies wetting their napkins.

I could hear a policeman talking to Vande under the wall, and suddenly I remembered (though I told myself still that I was dead sick of Africa) the devil's servant at Zigita waving away the lightning and the rain with an elephant-hair fan, the empty silent town after the drums had beaten the devil's warning. There was cruelty enough in the interior, but had we done wisely exchanging the supernatural cruelty for our own?

I was looking out of the window of the day nursery when the aeroplane fell. I could see it crash out of sight on to the playing fields at the top of the hill. The airman had dived, playing the fool before his younger brother and the other boys, he had miscalculated the height and struck the ground and was dead before he reached hospital. His small brother

never looked, never waited to hear if he were alive, but walked steadily away down the hill to the school and shut himself tearlessly in a lavatory. Someone went and found him there, there were no locks on any lavatory doors, nowhere where you could be alone.

Major Grant said, "And in a cupboard they keep birches. . . ."

The lorries drove up and down the day of the General Strike loaded with armed men. The café had been turned into a dressing station and a squad of Garde Mobile moved down the wide boulevard that runs from Combat to Menilmontant searching everyone on the pavement for arms. The whole of Paris was packed with troops; every corner, every high building sheltered a troop, they clustered along the walls in their blue steel helmets like woodlice. The road of the Revolution from Vincennes to the Place de la Concorde was lined with guns and cavalry. No breaking out here, no return to something earlier, something communal, something primitive.

More police were coming up to get their pickings beneath the wall. Vande and Amah were being persuaded towards the wooden station. I thought of Vande in the dark urging the carriers over the long gaping swaying bridge at Duogobmai; I remembered they had never had the goat to guard them from the elephants. It wouldn't have been any use now. We were all of us back in the hands of adolescence, and I thought rebelliously: I am glad, for here is iced beer and a wireless set which will pick up the Empire programme from Daventry, and after all it is home,

in the sense that we have been taught to know home, where we will soon forget the finer taste, the finer pleasure, the finer terror on which we might have built.

CHAPTER FIVE

POSTSCRIPT IN MONROVIA

A Boatload of Politicians

My host woke me early to say that if I cared to catch it a Liberian motor-launch was leaving that morning for Monrovia. If I missed it, I might have to wait a week for a Dutch cargo-boat, but he advised me all the same to stay.

The boat was making its maiden voyage down the coast from Cape Palmas to Monrovia. It cannot have been more than thirty feet long, not that I was able to pace it when we scrambled on board from the surf boat, for it was packed—packed with black politicians. There were a hundred and fifty of them on board, and if the owner of the boat had not been with us we should not have been allowed to embark. They shouted that there was no room, that we should sink the boat, they implored the captain not to let us on board, they were scared, for most of them had never been at sea before and the previous evening they had run on a rock and narrowly escaped off Sinoe. The launch tilted with their fear, first one way, then the other. But the owner got us on board,

he even found us enough room to set up chairs and sit down, though we couldn't, once settled there, stir a foot.

The launch, the owner told me, had been bought second-hand for £18 and repaired for £25. It hadn't even got marine engines. He had installed two second-hand automobile engines, a Dodge and a Studebaker, and except for the rock off Sinoe, it had done well. We slid farther away from the yellow sandy strip of Africa, from the fringe of dark green forest behind the tin shacks of Grand Bassa. The captain, a great fat Kru man in a wide-brimmed hat and a singlet, stood in a little glass shelter and shouted orders down a telephone to the engine-room just beneath his feet, the sun came blindingly up over the thin Japanese cotton awning, a black Methodist minister went to sleep on my shoulder, and the politicians temporarily ceased arguing about the election and began to argue with the captain.

"Say, captain," they protested in their formless nasal American negro voices, "you don't wanta use both engines yet. You gotta put out farther before you use both engines," and the captain argued with them and presently gave way. He couldn't issue any order without setting the passengers arguing with him.

It was sixty miles to Monrovia and the launch took seven and a half hours, lurching with incredible slowness across the flat scorching African sea with the rocking motion of the hundred and fifty politicians. It was an Opposition boat and the presence of a white man on board seemed to the politicians to have deep significance. Before we reached Monrovia every

delegate was convinced that England was behind them. There was to be a Convention in Monrovia of the Unit True Whig Party to elect a Presidential Candidate to oppose President Barclay and the True Whig Party. All is fair during a Liberian election and the Government agent at Cape Palmas had tried to arrest the owner of the boat and hold it up till the Convention was over. Some of the delegates were supporters of a Mr. Cooper, some of ex-President King, so though they all belonged to the same party, they had plenty to argue about, and the arguments got fiercer after midday, after the tin basins of cassava roots had been handed round (for meals were included in the tariff) and the bottles of cane juice. The cane juice in the midday heat worked quickly; almost immediately half the hundred and fifty politicians were roaring drunk. They couldn't do anything about it, because if they moved more than a foot the boat heeled over, and once there was a panic on board at a loud crash which reminded them of the rock they had hit the night before. Some tried to stand up and others shouted to them to be still as the boat heeled towards the glassy sea and the captain was heard shouting that he would put any man who moved in irons. I couldn't move because the Methodist minister was asleep on my shoulder, and the panic soon subsided. We hadn't hit a rock, somebody had passed out under the cane juice and his head had hit the deck.

The owner of the boat said to me, "These men: they are quiet and gentle now, but you wait till they get ashore. They are thirsting for blood. They would rather kill Barclay than see him elected."

An old man without any teeth suddenly said, "Do you know in Monrovia they have a map of the whole of Liberia? I am going to go and see it. It is in the possession of a family called Anderson. They have had it for years. Everyone who goes to Monrovia goes to see the map. Sinoe is marked on it, and Grand Bassa and Cape Palmas." Then a lot of people tried to trap me into saying whether I was financing Mr. Cooper or Mr. King. I might have made history that day, for I am sure if I had said I was financing Mr. Cooper, no one would have voted for Mr. King. And all the while behind the frieze of black heads, five hundred yards away, the yellow African beach slid unchangingly by without a sign of human occupation. Somebody was fishing from the end of the boat and with tiresome regularity catching a large fish. It might have been the same fish, just as it might have been the same patch of sand, but every time the captain left the wheel, trod over the sprawl of limbs into the bow and presently announced in a loud commanding voice, as if he were ordering somebody to be clamped into irons, "A fish!" and entered the fact in a log-book. There would be a momentary break in the babble until a voice began again, "Mishter Cooper ish ish a young man." "Ex—Presh—Pres—Presh, Mishter King has exshper, experish . . ."

The Nonconformist minister hadn't drunk anything. He woke up suddenly and without removing his head from my shoulder said, "We shall never go straight in Liberia until we let God into our conventions. We must let God choose."

I said, "I agree, of course, but how will you know which candidate God wants to choose?"

He said, "God made pencils, but man made india-rubber."

The old man without any teeth said, "That's a true word."

The minister said, "They'll give us cards when we go to the convention and we shall have to put a mark against a name. But pencil can be rubbed out with indiarubber. If we want God to have a chance in this convention we must take our pencils and push the point right through one of the names, tear it right out, then they won't be able to do anything with indiarubber."

By the late afternoon nearly everyone was asleep; but they woke when the promontory that shelters Monrovia came in sight: the German consulate and just above the beach the long white front of the British Legation. Everyone began to tidy themselves for the capital, put on waistcoats and ties, and there, after a brief panic as we heeled over the bar, was a little jetty and a reception committee of smart politicians cheering and waving and embracing each other with excitement.

I never got quite away from my fellow-passengers. For every day I spent in Monrovia some seedy individual would pluck at my sleeve among the wooden shacks of the waterside, and drawing me on one side would remind me that we had travelled together, pointing out to me, as the financier of the Opposition party, that he had left his affairs in Cape Palmas or Sinoe in bad order and was finding the capital city very expensive. Most of the Opposition, indeed, had to be sent home at the expense of the President.

Monrovia

To the casual visitor, at any rate, Monrovia is a more pleasant town than Freetown. Freetown is like an old trading port that has been left to rot along the beach; it is a spectacle of decay. But Monrovia is like a beginning; true, a beginning which has come to little beyond the two wide grassy main streets intersecting each other and lined with broken-paned houses all of wood and of one storey except for the brick churches, one little brick villa belonging to the Secretary of the Treasury, the three-storeyed Executive Mansion where the President lives, the State Department opposite, and the unfinished stone house of ex-President King. An asphalt drive, "for motor traffic only," goes down to the water-front, but there are very few motors and all pedestrians use it. Along the waterside are the shops, the big wooden stores of the English P.Z., of the German and Dutch companies where you can buy gin as cheap as nine-pence a bottle, and the small huts of the Syrians, the wooden shed of the Post Office with a rickety ladder on the outside. There are telephone poles along the main street and out by the one motor road towards Mount Barclay and the Firestone Rubber Plantations, but the telephone service no longer exists. The residential street runs gently uphill towards a waste of scorched rock and sand, the road to the English Legation and the lighthouse, and here and there among the rocks are planted the beginnings of stone houses, sometimes only the foundation laid, sometimes several storeys, so that these unfinished buildings have the appearance of houses gutted by fire.

They are the only form of investment Liberia provides, for though prospectuses have been issued for the Bank of Liberia Ltd., with a capital of 1,000,000 dollars divided into 200,000 shares, nobody has subscribed; as early as 1923 the Legislature granted the bank the exclusive right of issuing bank-notes and coins, but Liberia still depends for its currency on the British. The only Liberian coins in circulation are heavy copper pennies. So from ex-President King downwards anyone with any money to spare not invested in the Firestone Bank (the British Bank has left Liberia) puts it into building, but the buildings are very seldom finished. The foundations and the first storey usually exhaust the owner's capital, though sometimes years later a few more stones are added to the follies dotting the rough slopes near the sea.

It is easy to make fun of this black capital city; of the Secretary of State who, when a white man expressed his amazement that he should occupy such a position at so young an age as thirty-four, replied, "Pitt was a Prime Minister at thirty"; of a town where almost every other man is a lawyer and every man a politician. "There is no body of men," Thomas Paine wrote, "more jealous of their privileges than the Commons: because they sell them," and one cannot doubt that this motive forms a part of Liberian patriotism. The native in the interior, if he comes in close contact with a Government agent, has every reason to deplore "the mighty calamity of Government." But there is a pathos about these stunted settlements along the coast, the grassy streets, the follies on the rocky hillside, the pathos of a black

people planted down, without money or a home, on a coast of yellow fever and malaria to make what they can of an Africa from which their families have been torn centuries before. No one can pretend they have made much of their country, Colonel Davis's conduct of the Kru campaign is only one example of the horrors of their history, but to me it seems remarkable that they have retained their independence at all: a kind of patriotism has emerged from the graft and the privation.

England and France in the last century robbed them of territory; America has done worse, for she has lent them money. Without any resources of their own, except what they could squeeze out of the unfriendly natives in an undeveloped interior, they have had to borrow again and again. Each fresh loan has only paid off the previous indebtedness and left them with a smaller surplus and an inflated interest. They have tried to build roads before, as they are trying to build them now, and I had seen outside Grand Bassa how previous roads had gone backward, not forward. They once had a telephone system, but now they have only the leaning poles by the roadside. They had bought machines, but they hadn't had the money to work them, and driving out to the rubber plantations one passed the old dredges rusting in the scrub. I couldn't wonder at their inanition in the soaking heat. I remember that one day, going out to Mount Barclay, we passed a motor-lorry broken down on the road with one wheel off; there were the remains of a camp fire and the crew were sleeping in the bush. It was only twenty miles from Monrovia, but as I went out next day to visit ex-President King

the lorry and the crew were still camping there waiting for something to happen.

Nor can you wonder at their hatred and suspicion of the white man. The last loan and the last concession to the Firestone Company of Ohio all but surrendered their sovereignty to a commercial company with no interests in Liberia but rubber and dividends. The Liberian has quite rightly been condemned for his abuse of power in the interior, but the native can hardly expect a much higher standard of treatment from a commercial company without any responsibility to world opinion. It was a quite unconstitutional concession, in return for a loan, of 1,000,000 acres of Liberian territory on a lease of ninety-nine years. In 1935 only 60,000 acres were under cultivation: 45,000 acres outside Monrovia and 15,000 at Cape Palmas, but the concession remains an impediment to any form of development.

It was imagined, one may charitably suppose, that Firestone's would bring more than money into the country, that they would provide employment and stimulate trade. The year of my visit they were employing 6,000 natives supplied by the chiefs; no one could really tell whether that labour was voluntary or forced, but if the million acres should ever be cultivated and the employment figures rise in proportion, voluntary labour will certainly not supply the demand, and there is a great moral distinction between the usual form of forced labour in Africa, which at least pretends to be for the good of the community, and forced labour for the good of shareholders.

The wages paid, though it must be admitted that

they compared favourably with some of the British Government's rates in Sierra Leone, were not likely to bring prosperity to the Liberian tribes. The wages of tappers ran from eightpence to a shilling and a penny a day, of clearers from sevenpence to a shilling. Out of this they had to buy their own food, but not to the benefit of local trade. They must buy at the Firestone stores and Firestone's imported their own rice, so that it had to be sold at a rate one and sixpence in the hundredweight dearer than it could be bought in Monrovia stores, and the rate in Monrovia stores was already much dearer than anywhere else in Liberia.

Little wonder, then, if in the past the Liberian Legislature had chosen to look on the white man as somebody to be squeezed in return, and nobody can say they have not shown imagination in their methods. At one time a German shipping agent was the chief sufferer. His chauffeur killed a dog and the next day was arrested at the suit of the owner. The German agent was brought into court, and the owner in evidence said that last year her bitch, which she valued at ten dollars, had had five puppies which had fetched ten dollars each: that in a week or two she would have borne five more puppies, which she would have sold for the same figure. The court fined the German sixty dollars.

On another occasion the same agent was fetched out of bed by the police to meet a claim for damages suffered by a Liberian woman who was travelling in an Italian steamer for which the German line acted. She had been scratched by a monkey belonging to another passenger while the steamer was in Spanish

territorial waters. The doctor had put iodine on the scratch and no harm was done, but the woman mentioned the incident in a letter to her husband and he brought an action against the only person who could be reached, the German agent. The court awarded him 30,000 dollars. This was going too far and after a protest by the representatives of England, France and Germany, the Supreme Court found that the action lay outside the scope of the Liberian courts.

The Exiles

A curious international life was led by the few whites in the little shabby capital. Apart from the Firestone employees, who lived outside in European comfort on the plantation, there were not more than three dozen whites in Monrovia; there were Poles, Germans, Dutch, Americans, Italians, a Hungarian, French, and English; two of them were doctors, others were storekeepers, gold smugglers, shipping agents, and consuls. There was some comfort to be found at the legations; and though there was not such a thing as a water-closet in Monrovia, nearly everyone had an ice-box, for in the little dingy town there was little to do but drink, drink and wait for the fortnightly mail-boat which might bring frozen meat but was unlikely to bring a passenger.

These men and women were more exiled than the English in Freetown; they had less comfort and far less amusement; there was no golf course and the surf was far too dangerous for bathing. Once a week they played a little tennis at the British Legation or had a game of billiards, and once a week, too, the older

men of the white colony shot with a pistol at bottles perched above the beach at the edge of the British Legation ground. That custom had been going on for years, every Saturday evening until the light was too bad to see. One advantage their isolation had: it killed snobbery. Chargé d'Affaires and shop assistant, Consul-General's wife and storekeeper's wife were equal in Monrovia. It was the democracy of men and women wrecked together on a deserted coast, and to the casual visitor social life there seemed more human and kindly than in an English colony, in spite of the scandals and the tiny commercial and diplomatic intrigues and the fever, always the fever. I was only in Monrovia for ten days during the most healthy season of the year, but eight of the tiny population of whites went down with fever while I was there.

One couldn't expect them to do anything else but drink, beginning after breakfast with beer at each other's houses and ending with whisky at four in the morning. But what was worst was the iced *crème de menthe*. It was served everywhere automatically after lunch and dinner: it would have been thought eccentric not to like the sweet nauseating stuff, as it would have been thought curious not to enjoy at sundown, in the damp heat of the evening, while the backs of the hands and the armpits sweated all the time, the heavy cloying Tokay the Hungarian doctor kept. They had every reason to drink; you couldn't read much in a climate which rotted your books; you couldn't even deceive yourself that you were there for some good, ruling the natives, for it was the natives in this case who ruled you and presented, so

far as the Cabinet Ministers were concerned, a depressing example of sobriety and attention to business; you couldn't womanise, for the range was too embarrassingly limited; there were no games to play, no strangers regularly bringing the gossip of one's own country; there was no ambition, for Liberia, whether to the diplomat or to the store-keeper, was about the dearest of all ends; there was really nothing but drink and the wireless, and of the two the drink was preferable.

But, nevertheless, all the English had wireless: at six o'clock they would turn on the Empire Programme from Daventry, but even that limited and depressing choice of entertainment was inaudible; the West Coast defeated any instrument; and as a background to every drink and to all conversation the powerful instruments would wheeze and groan and whistle until eleven o'clock. This was the nearest they got to Home, this piercing din over the Atlantic. By eleven o'clock one was too drunk to mind, anyway.

As for the intrigues which brought a little liveliness into the hot damp day, a little activity, a small sense of importance, there were two while I was there. A gentleman with a great financial reputation had arrived in Monrovia to try to obtain for a big British trust the concession for all gold and precious minerals that might be found in the interior and to drive out such small lonely prospectors as Van Gogh. It was a confirmation of the story I had heard in Bo. He had arrived at the right moment, within two months of the Presidential election, when money was urgently needed, and he was prepared to spend £30,000 on easing the concession through. The only danger was

that he might be backing the wrong horse, but in a Liberian election this risk is small; no one really doubted that Mr. Barclay would be re-elected. Unfortunately within a few days of his arrival the financial expert was taken ill before he had been able to interview the President, and nothing would persuade the Liberian Ministers but that this was an astute move to lower the price. They were the soul of stiff politeness, but it was obvious that they intended to show that they could bargain too.

The other intrigue was diplomatic and concerned the Royal Jubilee. The Secretary of State had been for a very long while trying to persuade the British Chargé d'Affaires to go to church and hear the sermons of the Minister for Education. There was nothing political in *his* motives, he was an earnest humourless young man, he just thought that it would do anyone good to go to church, and the services at this church were almost identical with those of the Church of England. But his reforming zeal gave the British representative a chance to perform a diplomatic *coup*. He told the Secretary of State that not only would he come to church, but he would guarantee the presence of every British subject and probably of the other foreign representatives as well if on the particular Sunday the Minister for Education included in the prayers some reference to the Royal Jubilee. The Secretary of State, I think, was a little taken aback: he asked for time to consult the Minister of Education, but alas! I did not stay long enough in Monrovia to hear whether the bargain was struck.

One could hardly wonder that the more excitable

representatives in the international colony craved for a faster life. They were living on the barren edge of the country; not one of them had been more than a few days' trek into the interior, they had the most meagre and mistaken ideas of the native tribes; nor would any longer journeys or a more profound knowledge of Liberian conditions have been welcome to the Government, who had seen what damage a roving foreigner could do them in the British Blue Book based on a Vice-Consul's journey down the Kru coast. There was an occasion, many years ago, when the British residents raised the English flag in Monrovia, trying to re-enact on a miniature scale the Outlander revolt in Johannesburg, but the result failed as ignominiously as the Jameson Raid. I do not think there was any imperial ambition among the store-keepers of Monrovia, or among the foreign representatives, nor had they much to complain about from the Government. There was less discrimination against the white than there was against the black in most white colonies, and I think a fair observer would have been astonished at the moderation of the black rulers. What the whites suffered, they suffered with the whole population from the lack of drainage, medical services, communications, and the desire to intervene was an expression of boredom rather than of imperialism. The man, perhaps, most to be pitied was the American financial adviser, an elderly man who had seen successful service in Arabia and the Philippines, but whom Liberia had defeated. For since the President had declared a moratorium, he had been without any work. Two Poles were the active unofficial advisers, and the American lived on

in Monrovia at a reduced salary with nothing to do but shoot at bottles and hit billiard balls.

A flare-up of nervous irritation occurred a short while before my visit. The chauffeur of the French Consul had committed some offence, and an ignorant policeman who knew nothing about diplomatic immunities followed the servant into the Consulate and tried to arrest him. The Consul threw the man out, put on his diplomatic uniform and went down to the State building to demand from the Secretary of State an official apology from the Government. The Minister, young earnest Mr. Simpson, was quite prepared to apologise himself, but he refused to apologise on behalf of the Government. The whole affair would have been comic if it had not been a little tragic, for it showed to what absurdity, to what frayed nerves, the scorching damp, the bare exile, the shooting of bottles on Saturday evenings, the whistling loudspeakers lead. The French Consul went up the hill to the wireless station, which is run by a French company, and sent a message to a French gunboat he knew was passing down the coast. The gunboat anchored off Monrovia, the captain came ashore in a surf boat and the two solemn uniformed Frenchmen returned to Mr. Simpson's office. The captain laid his sword on Mr. Simpson's desk and said it would remain there until the Consul received an apology from the Government. The apology was given, the gunboat steamed away. I don't know what happened to the policeman.

Quite outside this strained, dreary and yet kindly life, at the end of several hours' rough driving from the capital, live the Firestone men in houses con-

taining shower baths and running water and electric light, with a wireless station, tennis courts and a bathing pool, and a new neat hospital in the middle of plantations which smell all the day through of latex, as it drips into little cups tied beneath incisions in the trunks. They, more than the English or the French, are the official Enemy, and no story of whipping post, smuggled arms or burnt villages is too wild to be circulated and believed among Liberians of both parties.

Politics

We arrived in Monrovia when the political campaign was getting under way; those politicians embracing each other on the jetty were only a foretaste of the excitement. For the curious thing about a Liberian election campaign, which goes on for more than two months if there's enough money in hand, is that, although the result is always a foregone conclusion, everyone behaves as if the votes and the speeches and the pamphlets matter. The Government prints the ballot papers, the Government owns both the newspapers, the Government polices the polling booths, but no one assumes beforehand that the Government will win, or if it is the turn of the Opposition, the Opposition. A curious fiction is kept up even among the foreign representatives. There are excited conversations at dinner parties; bets are always on the point of being laid. But the fiction, of course, stops short of losing money. Perhaps to an American, who is used to his state elections, the conditions seem less odd.

At this election, though, there may have been a very slight uncertainty just because the President was taking it so seriously and instead of surrendering his office was ensuring, by his plebiscite, that he would hold it for more than the length of three turns. There were rumours that the Cabinet was split, that Mr. Gabriel Dennis, the Secretary of the Treasury, who had distinguished himself by the sharp eye he kept on the funds of the Republic, was going to be jettisoned by his colleagues, and there was the unusual factor, too, that the President in power had as his opponent a former President who had shown his astuteness in manipulating the political machine. (For years the Presidential opponent had been Mr. Faulkner, the head of the People's Party and of the Monrovia ice factory, who had no experience in the finer shades of political manipulation. Indeed, ex-President King won the first round. For when Mr. Faulkner finally retired from the contest and his supporters joined the Unit True Whig Party, otherwise known as the dissident Whigs, half a dozen members of the People's Party kept together long enough to hold a convention to nominate Mr. King. As Mr. King was also nominated by the Unit True Whig Party, by Liberian law he would be able to have a representative of each party at every polling booth, while the Government would only have one, a very important point.

It will be seen that Liberian politics are complicated. Corruption does not make for simplicity as might be supposed. It may be all a question of cash and printing presses and armed police, but things have to be done with an air. Crudity as far

as possible is avoided. For example, Mr. King could not be the only candidate at the convention of the Unit True Whig Party; at some expense supporters for Mr. Cooper had to be brought to the convention, even though it was known beforehand that Mr. King would be nominated. I received on the morning of the convention a programme issued by the organisers, signed by Mr. Doughba Carmo Caranda, the General Secretary, and attested by Mr. Abayomi Karnga, the national chairman (the names indicated the policy of the party, Liberia for the Liberians, everyone had been busy finding themselves native names to contrast with the Dunbars, Barclays, Simpsons, Dennises of the Government). The proceedings, I read, were to end with a procession to the house of the nominated candidate, but rather ingenuously the route of the procession was given, by the Masonic Hall, up Broad Street, on to Front Street, "to the residence of the candidate." It was Mr. King who had a house in Front Street, not Mr. Cooper, so that the programme took some of the edge off the excitement. Rather damping, too, was the non-arrival of most of the delegates, for the second launch was not so successful as the one in which we travelled and stuck on a sandbank outside Monrovia. The convention was to open with prayer at two-thirty, but when we arrived at three-thirty they were still waiting for the marooned delegates. Afterwards things got rather rushed, for when we arrived back at five the convention was over. The brass band was trying to get out of the ground and head the procession, but the mob was too great, and our Legation car helped to block the road. Several delegates hissed feebly at

the little flag on the hood and a fat perspiring black pushed his head in at the window and asked furiously whether we did not know that this was a national occasion. There was a reek of cane juice and a few people looked nearly drunk enough to throw stones.

Meanwhile the President had staged another demonstration in front of his house: native dancers from the water-side slum of Kru Town rushed up and down before the Executive Mansion waving knives. They looked like Red Indians in their feathered head-dresses, and their spirited performance robbed the convention of a great many spectators. Later, when the blare of brass warned Monrovia that the procession was on its way, a rival procession was formed hastily outside the offices of state with large banners inscribed "Barclay the Hero of Liberia" and a rather enigmatic statement: "We want no King. We want no car. We want no money for our vote. Barclay is the Man". For some time I thought it was inevitable that the processions would meet in tiny Monrovia, but I had under-estimated the ingenuity of their leaders. Drunk as everyone was by this time, they were not drunk enough to risk a fight. The Kru dancers and their friends swarmed into the Executive Mansion and were given free drinks, to the disgust of the President's True Whig supporters, who had received nothing but the dictator's thanks from a balcony at his formal nomination.

The Opposition procession meanwhile trampled into the front garden of Mr. King's house, his wooden house in Front Street, not the large uncompleted stone palace in Broad Street. It was quite dark by

that time, but a few paraffin lamps indoors cast a pale light on the eyeballs of the crowd. Mr. King, who had been ill, spoke a few words from a balcony, but there was too much cheering and drinking going on all over the town for one to hear more than a few phrases: "national independence", "hand of friendship", "foremost part among the nations". The voice was tired and mechanical: it occurred to me that the fiction might be a sad one to the principal, who must go through all the right posturings without any hope at all. No one knew better than Mr. King that a President is never defeated by votes.

I visited Mr. King a few days later at his farmhouse outside Monrovia. With an old blue bargee's cap on the back of his head and a cigar in his mouth, he put up an excellent imitation of the old simple statesman in retirement. There was no doubt that he was a sick man. We both drank a good deal of gin while he went over and over the events of his downfall. From his obscure corner of West Africa he had managed to attract quite a lot of notice with the shipping of forced labour to Fernando Po and the pawning of children. He had feathered his nest nicely: he had his own little plantation of rubber trees he was waiting for Firestone to buy; he had his two and a half houses. But he hadn't really any hope of a return; he was quite ready, he said, if he was elected to accept the League of Nations plan of assistance, tie his finances to European advisers, put white Commissioners in charge of the interior, give away Liberian sovereignty altogether, but he knew quite well he wasn't going to be elected. All the rumours of Firestone money, all the speeches meant nothing at all.

He was complying with a custom; one could see that he would be glad to go back to bed. He had had a finer fling than most Liberian Presidents: banquets in Sierra Leone, royal salutes from the gunboat in the harbour, a reception at Buckingham Palace, a turn at the tables at Monte Carlo. He stood with his arm round his pretty wife's shoulders on his stoep while I photographed him, a black Cincinnatus back on his farm.

A Cabinet Minister

The Secretary of the Treasury belonged to a newer, more scrupulous Liberia just coming into existence. He, too, had travelled to Geneva and the United States. Plump, well-dressed, with soft sad spectacled eyes, he had a dignity upknown to the Creole of an English colony. There were no prefects to laugh at him, he laughed at himself, softly, without emphasis, for being honest, for caring for other things than politics, for letting slip so many of the crap-game chances. Mr. King had built himself houses and bought himself a rubber plantation; all the Secretary had bought was a little speed-boat in which to play about in the Monrovia delta among the mangrove swamps.

He lived in a little brick villa on grassy Broad Street; he was a bachelor; and when he gave us tea it was served by young clerks from the Treasury Department. He had dressed himself for the occasion (there was to be a little music) in an open-necked shirt and a large artistic tie. He was like a black Mr. Pickwick with a touch of Shelley. After tea we went

into the music room, a little cramped mid-Victorian parlour with family groups on the walls, the Venus of Milo, hideous coloured plaster casts of Tyrolean boys in sentimental attitudes, and paraffin lamps on high occasional tables. He played some songs the President had composed; the piano, of course, in that climate was out of tune. They were rather noisy, breathless songs, of which the President had written the words as well as the music; romantic love and piety: "Ave Maria" and "I sent my love a red, red rose, and she returned me a white." Then he played the President's setting of "I arise from dreams of thee". His friend the President, he said sadly, twirling on his stool, had once written much music and poetry: now—the Secretary of the Treasury sighed at the way in which politics encroached. He said, "Perhaps you know this song," and while the clerks from the Treasury went round lighting the paraffin lamps and turning the shades so that the glow fell in a friendly way on the Tyrolean children caressing their dogs or listening to stories at their mother's knees, he began to sing: "Whate'er befall I still recall that sun-lit mountain side." It was æstheticism at the lowest level if you will, but it was genuine æstheticism. The pathos of it was that this was the best material coastal Liberia could offer to a sensitive gentle mind: the music of Mr. Edwin Barclay, the plaster casts, *The Maid of the Mountains*, the paraffin lamps, a sentimental song called *Trees*, and the President's patriotic verses which he now beat out upon the piano: *The Lone Star Forever*.

When Freedom raised her glowing form on
Montserrado's verdant height,
She set within the dome of Night
'Midst lowering skies and thunderstorm
The star of Liberty!
And seizing from the waking Morn
Its burnished shield of golden flame
She lifted it in her proud name
And roused a people long forlorn
To nobler destiny.

It was no worse than most patriotic songs from older countries. To a stranger, I think, coming from a European colony, Monrovia and coastal Liberia would be genuinely impressive. He would find a simplicity, a pathos about the place which would redeem it from the complete seediness of a colony like Sierra Leone: planted without resources on this unhealthy strip of land they have held out; if they have brought with them the corruption of American politics, they have nurtured at the same time a sentiment, a patriotism, even a starveling culture. It is something, after all, to have a President who writes verses, however bad, and music, however banal. I could not be quite fair to them, coming as I did from an interior where there was a greater simplicity, an older more natural culture, and traditions of honesty and hospitality. After a trek of more than three hundred miles through dense deserted forest, after the little villages and the communal ember, the great silver anklets, the masked devil swaying between the huts, it was less easy to appreciate this civilisation of the coast. It seemed to me that they, almost as much

as oneself, had lost touch with the true primitive source. It was not their fault. Two hundred years of American servitude separated them from Africa; gave them their politics: their education at Liberia College: their Press: gave them this:

The Press

WORDS BUILDING
MOTHER

FIRST PRIZE

FOUR SHILLINGS

SECOND PRIZE

TWO SHILLINGS

FIRST ENTRY SIXPENCE. ADDITIONAL ENTRY 3D.

CLOSES MARCH 2. RESULTS MARCH 9.

Use the letters in Mother to spell as many words as you can. The competitor who sends in the largest number of words entitles to the First Prize and the Second Prize goes to the Competitor who sends in the next largest number of words. Address all Communications to the Editor.

"The Unit True Whig Party now comes forward claiming to have the financial backing of Firestone to defeat the Administration. This claim is wild enough, base enough and false enough to form a suitable crown for its four years of strenuous efforts to fool the people and overthrow the Republic. But it has reckoned without its host. This is the time too many when the pitcher goes to the well and is broken.

The last straw that breaks the camel's back. Or more appropriately the closing of the stable door after the horse has escaped."

"My appeal is directed to the young people of Liberia, and particularly to the young people of the Kru tribe, and it is an appeal for us to prepare ourselves for world leadership."

"Coming home to ourselves, we ask the question, what has Liberia contributed, and is contributing towards world advancement and improvement? What are we doing individually to make the world better, and Liberia safe for democracy?"

"With such a situation confronting the patriotic citizens of the country, and as loyal True Whigs, the question remains, what shall we do to be saved? It is highly gratifying to tell you boldly from genuine personal and otherwise reports received from Cape Palmas to Cape Mount we have the day for King. Watch out and see us victoriously rise."

"The Congo Progressive Association met in semi-annual conclave at the residence of Hon. Abayomi Karna last week, and while there feasted and talked liberally. The feast ended in a clean sweep, and the talk in a muddle. Thus in this first coup nothing was added to the Unit. But if it keeps on springing such surprises upon unsuspecting guests, even that which it seemeth to have will be taken away from it, and itself cast out as being unprofitable."

FLOREAT COLLEGIUM LIBERIA

By R. T. D.

When Church was o'er, the line was formed as
before,

In caps, gowns, hoods, black and white, we did
implore

The sympathy of the noblest and all the poor
Who made us feel like still,

Floreat Collegium Liberia.

On Thursday noon, the Commencement was begun,
Methought I heard the sound of thundering gun,
Telling us the day is come, the night is gone—

The day was calm, serene and fine,

Floreat Collegium Liberia.

I heard the Band to sound, the Clay-Ashland Band,
And busy though I was, I could no later stand,
For the sound was mighty and did peal through
the land.

It made me sing this sweet refrain,

Floreat Collegium Liberia.

The College sang a song and prayer was said,
Then the "Sal" rose, greeted us and nobly pled,
And he roused the silence of the heroic dead.

My heart did throb within and say:

Floreat Collegium Liberia.

Then followed the "Val", the leader of the Class.
And with word transparent as a shining glass,
He gave us true mental food, yet not in brass.

He made us feel and wish within :
Floreat Collegium Liberia.

A song was sung; then rose the Speaker of the Day,
This humorous man did make us laugh and play;
His speech was fine; full of humour and delay.
He made us feel and wish within :
Floreat Collegium Liberia.

Unlike the Commencements of the previous days,
A thing was done that true credit wrought and
praise—
It was worthy prizes offered for the plays,
By the first Lady of the land :
Floreat Collegium Liberia.

Unlike the Commencements preceded this,
The degrees were conferred in ceremonious ways,
And all who saw this would truly praise for days
The efforts of the Acting Sage,
Floreat Collegium Liberia.

All hail! all hail!! hail the closing day of mirth,
That to us this day doth give a joyous birth
And make us prone heavenward and not to earth,
Lux in Tenebris, from thee is heard.
Floreat Collegium Liberia.

Farewell, farewell, to thee thou dying year of toil
Now is ease as then was labour for our soil,
In thee our time we nonetheless did spoil;
But laboured hard and wishing still,
Floreat Collegium Liberia.

Welcome, welcome, thou season of rest and ease,
The year has brought thee from across the seas;
O bid fair, bid fair to us to make us please,
To sing this longing strain for aye,
Flo-re-at Col-le-gi-um Li-be-ria!

Return

But though it was this impression that followed me on board the cargo steamer which had been wirelessly to call off Monrovia for passengers, the memory, too, of hundreds of children in the Catholic school bellowing out the National Anthem:

With heart and hand our country's cause
defending,
We'll meet the foe with valour unpretending.
Long live Liberia, happy land,
A home of glorious liberty by God's command

—one realised, going out by surf boat towards the bar, that thin line of white which divided this world from the other, the world of the smokestack, the siren that called us impatiently on board, the officer on the captain's bridge who watched us through glasses, how much less separated they really were from the true primitive than we. It was at their back, it wasn't centuries away. If they had taken the wrong road, they had only to retrace their steps a very little distance in space and not in time. The little jetty moved jerkily backwards, the river came into sight, the silver mangrove branches straddling like the ribs of old umbrellas on either side. Two hundred and fifty

miles up that stream still existed the exact spot, the broken tree-trunk, the swarm of red ants where I had waited for my lost companions. The half-built Customs house, the waterside squalor of Kru Town, the asphalt road up to grassy Broad Street, they slipped behind with the sweep of the oars, but they belonged to the same world as the huddled huts at Duogobmai, the devil's servant fanning away the storm, the old woman who had made lightning trailing back to her prison with the rope round her waist. They were all gathered together behind the white line of the bar no European steamer ever crossed.

How happy I had thought I should be, while I was struggling down to Grand Bassa, back in *my* world. The bar took the prow and lifted it out of the water, one wave curled beneath us and broke along the beach of Kru Town, the second line broke above us, stinging the face, washing along the boards of the wide shallow boat, and there we were beyond, looking back at the bar and behind it Africa. A mammy chair came rattling down from the tarred English side. Of course I was happy, I told myself, opening the bathroom door, examining again a real water-closet, studying the menu at lunch, while out of the port-hole Cape Mount slid away, Liberia slid away, with Abyssinia the only part of Africa where white men do not rule. One had been scared and sick and one was well again, in the world to which one belonged.

But what had astonished me about Africa was that it had never been really strange. Gibraltar and Tangier—those extended just parted hands—seemed more than ever to represent an unnatural breach. The

'heart of darkness' was common to us both. Freud has made us conscious as we have never been before of those ancestral threads which still exist in our unconscious minds to lead us back. The need, of course, has always been felt, to go back and begin again. Mungo Park, Livingstone, Stanley, Rimbaud, Conrad represented only another method to Freud's, a more costly, less easy method, calling for physical as well as mental strength. The writers, Rimbaud and Conrad, were conscious of this purpose, but one is not certain how far the explorers knew the nature of the fascination which worked on them in the dirt, the disease, the barbarity and the familiarity of Africa.

The captain leant over the rail, old and dissatisfied, complaining of his men: "Boil the whole bloody lot of the men in the ship together and you wouldn't make an ordinary seaman"; he was looking back—to the age of sail. At Freetown guests came on board and we drank ourselves free from Africa. An officer came and eyed me like an enemy across the table in the smoking-room. "I'd send my ticket to the Board of Trade, my dear friend, and tell them to—I tell you, my dear friend. . . ." The captain stuck his fingers down his throat, brought up his drink and was dead sober again, and the ship went out of harbour, out of Africa. But their dissatisfaction was like a navel-string that tied them to its coast.

For there are times when the nearest the European has ever got to the interior, to the communal life with its terror and its gentleness, seems to be the Coast; Major Grant ringing up the brothel in Savile Row, the Old Etonian in Kensington Gardens, the Nottingham 'tart' and the droshky-drivers of Riga

dwell on that rim of land which is known all the world over as the Coast, the one and only coast. They are not, after all, so far from the central darkness: Miss Kilvane listening to the ghost of Joanna just as the circle of blacks in Tailahun listened to the enigmatic speech of Landow; the Catholic priest saying, "And now the Immaculate Conception" as the bus drove through the market, the tangle of stalls and overhead wires, the neo-Gothic hotels under the black overhead Midland fog. This may explain the deep appeal of the seedy. It is nearer the beginning; like Monrovia its building has begun wrong, but at least it has only begun; it hasn't reached so far away as the smart, the new, the chic, the cerebral.

It isn't that one wants to stay in Africa: I have no yearning for a mindless sensuality, even if it were to be found there: it is only that when one has appreciated such a beginning, its terrors as well as its placidity, the power as well as the gentleness, the pity for what we have done with ourselves is driven more forcibly home.

While I was fishing in the dull canal
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
Musing upon the King my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him.

After the blinding sunlight on the sand beyond the bar, after the long push of the Atlantic sea, the lights of Dover burning at four in the morning, a cold April mist coming out from shore with the tender. A child was crying in a tenement not far from the Lord Warden, the wail of a child too young to speak, too

young to have learnt what the dark may conceal in the way of lust and murder, crying for no intelligible reason but because it still possessed the ancestral fear, the devil was dancing in its sleep. There, I thought, standing in the cold empty Customs shed with a couple of suitcases, a few pieces of silver jewellery, a piece of script found in a Bassa hut, an old sword or two, the only loot I had brought with me, was as far back as one needed to go, was Africa: the innocence, the virginity, the graves not opened yet for gold, the mine not broken with sledges.

The Lawless Roads



AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS is the personal impression of a small part of Mexico at a particular time, the spring of 1938. Time proved the author wrong in at least one of his conclusions—the religious apathy in Tabasco was more apparent than real. A month after the author left Villahermosa, the capital, peasants tried to put up an altar in a ruined church. Bloodshed and an appeal to the Federal Government followed, with the result that the Bishop of Tabasco was allowed to return to his diocese, the first resident bishop for fourteen years. There remains Chiapas . . .

NOTE TO THIRD EDITION

ELEVEN years have passed since this book was written, and it may seem now that the author dwells too much on a religious situation liable to change at the expense of more permanent sides of Mexican life. My excuse must be that I was commissioned to write a book on the religious situation, not on folk lore or architecture or the paintings of Rivera.

Those interested may find on page 129 and the succeeding pages the source of my story, *The Power and the Glory*.

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What made the change? The hills and towers
Stand otherwise than they should stand,
And without fear the lawless roads
Ran wrong through all the lard.

EDWIN MUIR

Man's like the earth, his hair like grasse is grown,
His veins the rivers are, his heart the stone.

Wit's Recreations (1640)

To consider the world in its length and breadth, its various history, the many races of man, their starts, their fortunes, their mutual alienation, their conflicts; and then their ways, habits, governments, forms of worship; their enterprise, their aimless courses, their random achievements and requirements, the impotent conclusion of long-standing facts, the tokens, so faint and broken, of a superintending design, the blind evolution of what turn out to be great powers or truth, the progress of things, as if from unreasoning elements, not towards final causes, the greatness and littleness of man, his far-reaching aims, his short duration, the curtain hung over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary hopeless irreligion, that condition of the whole race, so fearfully yet exactly described in the Apostle's words, "having no hope, and without God in the world"—all this is a vision to dizzy and appal; and inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution.

What shall be said to this heart-piercing, reason-bewildering fact? I can only answer, that either there is no Creator, or this living society of men is in a true sense discarded from His presence . . . *if* there be a God, *since* there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity.

CARDINAL NEWMAN

The Lawless Roads



PROLOGUE

I

The Anarchists

I WAS, I suppose, thirteen years old. Otherwise why should I have been there—in secret—on the dark croquet lawn? I could hear the rabbit moving behind me, munching the grass in his hutch; an immense building with small windows, rather like Keble College, bounded the lawn. It was the school; from somewhere behind it, from across the quad, came a faint sound of music: Saturday night, the school orchestra was playing Mendelssohn. I was alone in mournful happiness in the dark.

Two countries just here lay side by side. From the croquet lawn, from the raspberry canes, from the greenhouse and the tennis lawn you could always see—dominatingly—the great square Victorian buildings of garish brick: they looked down like skyscrapers on a small green countryside where the fruit trees grew and the rabbits munched. You had to step carefully: the border was close beside your gravel path. From my mother's bedroom window—where she had borne the youngest of us to the sound of school chatter and the disciplinary bell—you looked straight down into the quad, where the hall and the chapel and the classrooms stood. If you pushed open a green baize door in a passage by my father's study, you entered another passage deceptively similar, but

none the less you were on alien ground. There would be a slight smell of iodine from the matron's room, of damp towels from the changing rooms, of ink everywhere. Shut the door behind you again, and the world smelt differently: books and fruit and eau-de-Cologne.

One was an inhabitant of both countries: on Saturday and Sunday afternoons of one side of the baize door, the rest of the week of the other. How can life on a border be other than restless? You are pulled by different ties of hate and love. For hate is quite as powerful a tie: it demands allegiance. In the land of the skyscrapers, of stone stairs and cracked bells ringing early, one was aware of fear and hate, a kind of lawlessness—appalling cruelties could be practised without a second thought; one met for the first time characters, adult and adolescent, who bore about them the genuine quality of evil. There was Collifax, who practised torments with dividers; Mr. Cranden with three grim chins, a dusty gown, a kind of demoniac sensuality; from these heights evil declined towards Parlow, whose desk was filled with minute photographs—advertisements of art photos. Hell lay about them in their infancy.

There lay the horror and the fascination. One escaped surreptitiously for an hour at a time: unknown to frontier guards, one stood on the wrong side of the border looking back—one should have been listening to Mendelssohn, but instead one heard the rabbit restlessly cropping near the croquet hoops. It was an hour of release—and also an hour of prayer. One became aware of God with an intensity—time hung suspended—music lay on the air: anything

might happen before it became necessary to join the crowd across the border. There was no inevitability anywhere . . . faith was almost great enough to move mountains . . . the great buildings rocked in the darkness.

And so faith came to one—shapelessly, without dogma, a presence above a croquet lawn, something associated with violence, cruelty, evil across the way. One began to believe in heaven because one believed in hell, but for a long while it was only hell one could picture with a certain intimacy—the pitchpine partitions of dormitories where everybody was never quiet at the same time; lavatories without locks: “There, by reason of the great number of the damned, the prisoners are heaped together in their awful prison . . .”; walks in pairs up the suburban roads; no solitude anywhere, at any time. The Anglican Church could not supply the same intimate symbols for heaven; only a big brass eagle, an organ voluntary, “Lord, Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing”, the quiet croquet lawn where one had no business, the rabbit, and the distant music.

Those were primary symbols; life later altered them; in a midland city, riding on trams in winter past the Gothic hotel, the super-cinema, the sooty newspaper office where one worked at night, passing the single professional prostitute trying to keep the circulation going under the blue and powdered skin, one began slowly, painfully, reluctantly, to populate heaven. The Mother of God took the place of the brass eagle: one began to have a dim conception of the appalling mysteries of love moving through a ravaged world—the Curé d’Ars admitting to his

mind all the impurity of a province, Péguy challenging God in the cause of the damned. It remained something one associated with misery, violence, evil, "all the torments and agonies," Rilke wrote, "wrought on scaffolds, in torture chambers, mad-houses, operating theatres, underneath vaults of bridges in late autumn. . . ."

Vaults of bridges: I think of a great metal bridge by the railway station of my old home, a sense of grit and the long reverberation of plates as the trains went by overhead and the nursemaids pushed their charges on past the ruined castle, the watercress beds, towards the common, past the shuttered private entrance which the local lord had not used for a generation. It was a place without law—I felt that even then, obscurely: no one really was responsible for anyone else. Only a few walls were left of the castle Chaucer had helped to build; the lord's house had been sold to politicians. I remember the small sunk almshouses by the canal and a man running furiously into one of them—I was with my nurse—he looked angry about something: he was going to cut his throat with a knife if he could get away from his neighbours, "having no hope, and without God in the world."

I returned to the little town a while ago—it was Sunday evening and the bells were jangling; small groups of youths hovered round the traffic lights, while the Irish servant girls crept out of back doors in the early dark. They were "Romans", but they were impertinent to the priest if he met them in the high street away from the small, too new Catholic church in one of the red-brick villaed streets above the valley. They couldn't be kept in at night. They

would return with the milk in a stranger's car. The youths with smarmed and scented hair and bitten cigarettes greeted them by the traffic lights with careless roughness. There were so many fish in the sea . . . sexual experience had come to them too early and too easily.

A boy of twenty and a girl of fifteen had been found headless on the railway line. They had lain down together with their necks on the rails. She was expecting a child—her second. Her first had been born when she was thirteen, and, though that wasn't mentioned at the inquest, her parents had been unable to fix responsibility among fourteen youths. The coroner suggested there was nothing to justify a verdict of "unsound mind". That was warranted only where pain and distress had been intense. but here—"The only suggestion here," he said, "is that the girl might have been going to have a baby. It appears to be a case where that stage was reached through sheer lack of courage."

A juror asked, "Did the father and mother of the girl make any disturbance at the thought that there was going to be another baby?"

The father, "No, we spoke to her calmly."

A juror, "It had no effect on her?"

The father, "Yes, she dropped her head and started crying."

I walked down towards my old home, down the dim drab high street, between the estate agents', the two cinemas, the cafés; there existed still faint signs of the old market town—there was a crusader's helmet in the church. People are made by places, I thought; I called this "home", and sentiment moved

in the winter evening, but it had no real hold. Smoke waved in the sky behind the Tudor Café and showed the 8.52 was in. You couldn't live in a place like this—it was somewhere to which you returned for sleep and rissoles by the 6.50 or the 7.25; people had lived here once and died with their feet crossed to show they had returned from a crusade, but now . . . Yellowing faces peered out of the photographer's window, through the diamonded Elizabethan pane—a genuine pane, but you couldn't believe it because of the Tudor Café across the street. I saw a face I knew in a wedding group, but it had been taken ten years before—there was something *démodé* about the waistcoat. With a train every hour to town there wasn't much reason to be photographed here—except, of course, for passports in a hurry. Well, next month, perhaps Mexico . . . and why Mexico? Did I really expect to find there what I hadn't found here? "Why, this is hell," Mephistopheles told Faustus, "nor am I out of it."

In the evening paper a woman made a statement to the police, "I went downstairs. Oh! I had such a funny feeling. I saw the bread-knife. I sharpened it up and thought if I only had the strength I could push it in with one go. I went upstairs. My husband was lying on his back. I pulled back the bedclothes, and holding the knife in both hands I made sure to get him in the right place. I do not know, but it seemed if someone hit my hands down with a mallet. The knife went in as if his body was rotten. He sat up in the bed and hollered out 'Hi, hi, hi.'" It seemed if someone . . . one was reminded of the unseen companion on Everest to whom Smythe offered

food, and of that Antarctic trudge at the limit of strength when there always seemed to Shackleton's companions one more than could be accounted for.

At the newsagents' they were selling a game called "Monopoly", played with a picture-board and dice and little counters. It was very popular locally: there were "Monopoly" parties. "The object," the rules said, "of owning property is to collect rent from opponents stopping there. Rentals are greatly increased by the erection of houses and hotels. . . . Players falling on an unoccupied square may raise a loan from the bank, otherwise property will be sold to the highest bidder. . . . Players may land in gaol."

In a shabby little shop there were second-hand copies of *London Life*—articles about high heels and corsets and long hair. And there the great buildings stood—the chapel, the hall. There were new ones since my time. On this side of the boundary they are always building: you go away and come back and there is always something new—*London Life* and the Tudor Café and the Irish servant girls making their assignations for a ditch. Up on the hillside—scenes of Sunday walks—the beech trees were in flamboyant decay; little boxes for litter put up by the National Trust had a dainty and doily effect; and in the inn the radio played continuously. You couldn't escape it: with your soup a dramatised account of the battle of Mons, and with the roast a Methodist church service. Four one-armed men dined together, arranging their seats so that their arms shouldn't clash.

In the morning, mist lay heavy on the Chilterns.

Boards marking desirable building lots dripped on short grass, and the skeletons of harrows lay unburied on the wet stubble. With visibility shut down to fifty yards you got no sense of a world, of simultaneous existences: each thing was self-contained like an image of private significance, standing for something else—Metroland loneliness. The door of the Plough Inn chimed when you pushed it, ivory balls clicked, and a bystander said, "They do this at the Crown, Margate"—England's heart beating out in bagatelle towards her eastern extremity. In a small front garden before a red villa a young girl knelt in the damp with an expression abased and secretive while she sawed through the limbs of a bush, the saw wailing through wet wood, and a woman's angry voice called, "Judy, Judy," and a dog barked in the poultry farm across the way. A cigarette fumed into ash with no one in sight near a little shut red door marked "Ker Even".

The Cairn terrier farm stood on the crest of the hill. The dogs can never have been quiet; masculine women holding big steel combs strode in tweeds past the kennels. A notice said, "Mazawattee Tea". Bungalows were to let. Among the beech woods a brand new house was advertised for sale. It had been built with dignity as if to last, as though it stood for something—if only the pride of ownership. But it had been lived in only a month; the woods and commons were held out precariously by wire. The owner had married in December and had been divorced in August; they had seen one of each season—except for autumn—and neither wanted the house to live in afterwards. A handyman swept up the

beech leaves from the paths—a losing fight against the woods—and lamented the waste of it all.

“Four coats of paint in every room. . . I was going to make a pool in the dell down there—another month and I’d have got the kitchen garden straight.”

A few acres of land, a desirable residence for as long as the marriage lasts, the soil exacting no service and no love—no responsibility for the child on the line. “The object of owning property . . .”

2

The Faith

IN July 1926, Father Miguel Pro landed at Veracruz. He was twenty-five years old and a Jesuit. He came back to his own country from a foreign seminary much as Campion returned to England from Douai. We know how he was dressed when a year and a half later he came out into the prison yard to be shot, and he may well have worn the same disguise when he landed (the equivalent of Campion’s doublet and hose): a dark lounge suit, soft collar and tie, a bright cardigan. Most priests wear their mufti with a kind of uneasiness, but Pro was a good actor.

He needed to be. Within two months of Pro’s landing, President Calles had begun the fiercest persecution of religion anywhere since the reign of Elizabeth. The churches were closed, Mass had to be said secretly in private houses, to administer the Sacraments was a serious offence. Nevertheless, Pro gave Communion daily to some three hundred

people, confessions were heard in half-built houses in darkness, retreats were held in garages. Pro escaped the plain-clothes police again and again. Once he found them at the entrance to a house where he was supposed to say Mass; he posed as a police officer, showing an imaginary badge and remarking, "There's a cat bagged in here," and passed into the house and out again with his cassock under his arm. Followed by detectives when he left a Catholic house and with only fifty yards' start, he disappeared altogether from their sight round a corner—the only man they overtook was a lover out with his girl. The prisons were filling up, priests were being shot, yet on three successive first Fridays Pro gave the Sacrament to nine hundred, thirteen hundred, and fifteen hundred people.

They got him, of course, at last (they had got him earlier if only they had known it, but they let him go). This time they made no mistake, or else the biggest mistake of all. Somebody had thrown a bomb at Obregón's car in Chapultepec Park—from another car. The evidence since then points to Government complicity. All the assailants escaped but the driver, who was shot dead. A young Indian called Tirado was passing by, fled at the explosion, and was arrested. He was tortured without effect: he persisted in declaring himself innocent. The police pounced on those they feared most—Pro and his two brothers, Humberto and Roberto, and Luis Segovia Vilchis, a young engineer and Catholic leader. No evidence was brought against them; they were not tried by the courts. The American ambassador thought he could do more good by not intervening

and left next day with the President and Will Rogers, the humorist, on a pullman tour; one South American ambassador intervened and got a reprieve—timed too late to save any but Roberto. Pro was photographed by the official photographer, praying for his enemies by the pitted wall, receiving the *coup de grâce*; the photographs were sent to the Press—to show the firmness of the Government—but within a few weeks it became a penal offence to possess them, for they had had an effect which Calles had not foreseen.

For Mexico remained Catholic; it was only the governing class—politicians and pistoleros—which was anti-Catholic. It was a war—they admitted it—for the soul of the Indian, a war in which they could use the army consisting mainly of Indians attracted by a dollar a day. (The individuals who composed the army, too, were Catholic, but it is quite easy to keep an uneducated soldier in ignorance of what he is doing.) By the time I left for Mexico, Calles had been gone some years—flown over into exile by his rival, Cárdenas. The anti-religious laws were still enforced except in one state, San Luis Potosí, but the pressure from the Catholic population was beginning to make itself felt. Churches—now Government property—were allowed to open in most of the states, except for the hundreds that had been turned into cinemas, newspaper offices, garages. A proportion of priests calculated according to the size of the population was allowed to serve by the state governments. The ratio was seldom more favourable than one priest to ten thousand people, but the law, particularly in the Federal District of Mexico City, was slackly

enforced. But in some other states the persecution was maintained. In Veracruz the churches remained closed until the peasants rose when a child was shot, early in 1937, in Orizaba; in Tabasco, the tropical state of river and swamp and banana grove, every church was believed to have been destroyed by the local dictator, Garrido Canabal, before he fled to Costa Rica—there wasn't a priest in the state; in Chiapas no church was open for Mass, the bishop was in exile, and little news came out of that mountainous untravelled region where the only railway line runs along the coast to Guatemala. Nowhere were priests allowed to open schools. Educational programmes everywhere were laid down by the Government on dusty rationalist lines—nineteenth century materialism reminiscent of Herbert Spencer and the Thinkers' Library, alpaca jackets and bookshops on Ludgate Hill. . . .

3

THE rabbits moved among the croquet hoops and a clock struck: God was there and might intervene before the music ended. The great brick buildings rose at the end of the lawn against the sky—like the hotels in the United States which you can watch from Mexico leaning among the stars across the international bridge.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BORDER

Across the River

THE border means more than a customs house, a passport officer, a man with a gun. Over there everything is going to be different; life is never going to be quite the same again after your passport has been stamped and you find yourself speechless among the money-changers. The man seeking scenery imagines strange woods and unheard-of mountains; the romantic believes that the women over the border will be more beautiful and complaisant than those at home; the unhappy man imagines at least a different hell; the suicidal traveller expects the death he never finds. The atmosphere of the border—it is like starting over again; there is something about it like a good confession: poised for a few happy moments between sin and sin. When people die on the border they call it “a happy death”.

The money-changers' booths in Laredo formed a whole street, running downhill to the international bridge; then they ran uphill on the other side into Mexico, just the same but a little shabbier. What makes a tourist choose one money-changer rather than another? The same prices were chalked up all the way down to the slow brown river—“3.50 pesos for a dollar”; “3.50 pesos for a dollar.” Perhaps they look at the faces, but the faces were all the same too—half-caste faces.

I had imagined a steady stream of tourist cars going across from America on this side into Mexico over there, but there wasn't one. Life seemed to pile up like old cans and boots against a breakwater; you were part of the silt yourself. A man in San Antonio had said I'd be sure to find a car going down, and an agent near the bridge-head said that was right—he knew for a fact that there was a Mexican driving down from San Antonio ("in a fine German car") who would give me a seat to Mexico City for a few dollars. I waited and waited and of course he never turned up; I don't think he even existed, though why they should have wanted to keep me on *their* side of the river I don't know. They weren't getting any money out of me.

Every half-hour I walked down to the river bank and looked at Mexico; it looked just the same as where I was—I could see the money-changers' booths running uphill through the heat and a kind of mass of people near the bridge-head—the silt washing up on their side of the breakwater too. I could imagine them saying over there, "There's an American going from Monterrey to New York in a fine German car. He'll give you a seat for a few dollars"; and people like me were waiting on the other side, staring across the Rio Grande at the money-changers and thinking, "That's the United States," waiting for a traveller who didn't exist at all. It was like looking at yourself in a mirror.

Over there—one argued to oneself—were Chichen Itzá and Mitla and Palenque, the enormous tombstones of history, the archæologists' Mexico; serapes and big hats and Spratling silver from Taxco to

delight the tourist; for the historian relics of Cortés and the Conquistadores; for the art critic the Rivera and Orozco frescoes; and for the business man there were the oil-fields of Tampico, the silvermines of Pachuca, the coffee-farms in Chiapas, and the banana groves of Tabasco. For the priest prison, and for the politician a bullet. You could buy a great deal for your dollar, everyone said.

I walked back up to the plaza and bought a paper. It was my unlucky day. The paper was being edited by the high school students—guest editors and guest reporters; it was full of small-town gossip and what was muttered on the campus. Impatient, revolutionary young men and women? Not a bit of it. The platitudes of age are often the main discoveries of youth. Geneva . . . democracy . . . popular fronts . . . the threat of Fascism. One might as well have been in the Albert Hall. As for Mexico, there wasn't as much news of it here as in New York. In New York there had been stories of fighting across the border from Brownsville—a man called General Rodríguez had organised discontented farmers, who were losing their land to the Indians under the Agrarian Laws, into a Fascist body called the Gold Shirts. The New York papers had sent down special reporters: one of them had taken a taxi from Brownsville to Matamoros and back and reported he'd seen no fighting but a lot of discontent. One pictured the earnest tough face peering through the glass at discontent on the dry plain. Somebody in New York told me General Rodríguez had forty thousand trained men on the Texas border—I'd be missing everything if I missed Rodríguez.

You get used in Mexico to disappointment—a town seems fine at evening and then in daylight the corruption seeps through, a road peters out, a muleteer doesn't turn up, the great man on acquaintance becomes strangely muted, and when you get to the gigantic ruins you are too tired to see them. It was that way with Rodríguez. He came to nothing.

The night before I had been in San Antonio. That's Texas, and Texas seemed to be half Mexico already—and half Will Rogers. In the train from New Orleans a Texan in the car talked continuously in the Will Rogers voice, the commercial drawl, the small-town complacent wisdom. All through the night the proverbs welled out full of fake kindness and superficial truth—a Metro-Goldwyn philosophy. And a New Mexican with an exotic shirt covered with polka dots and an untrustworthy mestizo face talked back, neither paying attention to the other, all through the night talking at a tangent over the hip flasks.

The brown and convex plains spread out on either side of the car, and oil flared on the horizon like the flames on a sacrificial pyramid, and the New World and the Old World talked in the carriage. That is really the only thing that journeys give you—talk. There is so much weariness and disappointment in travel that people have to open up—in railway trains, over a fire, on the decks of steamers, and in the palm courts of hotels on a rainy day. They have to pass the time somehow, and they can pass it only with themselves. Like the characters in Chekhov they have no reserves—you learn the most intimate

secrets. You get an impression of a world peopled by eccentrics, of odd professions, almost incredible stupidities, and, to balance them, amazing endurances.

Biography

While the Texan talked across the car, my neighbour stared out of the window. He had a sensitive sick face, an air of settled melancholy. He looked like a Victorian with religious doubts, somebody like Clough, but he had no side-whiskers and his hands were practical hands—not the pretty useless hands of a writer or a theologian. He said he had been travelling for eight thousand miles, all round the United States by train in a great loop. One more loop and he'd be home, somewhere a hundred miles from San Francisco. It was his first holiday for three years, but he wouldn't be sorry when it was over.

He talked gently, with difficulty, staring moodily out at the Texan plain. It seemed that he hadn't spoken to anyone much for three years. He lived alone and he couldn't see people at his job. Now he was going back for another three years' loneliness. I wondered what his job could be to make him a hermit within a hundred miles of San Francisco. "You see," he said, "you're at it night and day. You can't trust a hired man. The birds are so sensitive they get nervous and sick if a stranger's around."

It appeared that he bred turkeys, living alone with his flock of eleven hundred. They lived in the fields and he lived in an auto trailer, sleeping wherever

his turkeys chose to sleep, bumping after them till they settled at sunset. He had a gun under the pillow and his dogs warned him if there was a thief or a wild dog near. Sometimes he was awakened four times in a night and never knew what he would have to face, an armed hobo or just a skulking dog. The first year or two he'd slept pretty badly. Well, in another three years maybe he'd have saved enough money to go into a business which would allow him to enjoy life, see people, marry (you couldn't expect a girl to live in a trailer alone with him and eleven hundred turkeys).

"What sort of business?"

He turned his sad inward-looking eyes away from the dark plain and the flaming oil. "Breeding chickens. They're stationary."

San Antonio

In the day San Antonio is more Mexican than American, not quite genuine Mexican (it is far too clean for that) but picture postcard Mexican. The sermon was preached in Spanish in the Catholic cathedral, while electric fans revolved above statues representing in their pale colours and plaster poses the most noble and fragile sentiments. As for the congregation, they were like pictures in early Victorian albums: the black mantillas and the small vivid pointed faces might have come out of Lady Blessington's *Book of Beauty*. The San Antonio River is wound cunningly through the town like a pattern on a valentine (does it make a heart?) with

little waterfalls and ferny banks. Just as when you read a keepsake album—

To me more dear than all their rich perfume
The chaste camellia's pure and spotless bloom—

you have the sensation in San Antonio by day of the world's being deliciously excluded. Original sin under the spell of elegance has lost its meaning. Where, I thought, loitering on a bridge above the little tamed river, was there any sign of that "terrible aboriginal calamity" which Newman perceived everywhere? This—during the day—was the perfect ivory tower. The horror and the beauty of human life were both absent. It was a passing sensation, for the ivory tower has its own horror: the terrifying egoism of exclusion.

Catholic Action

But you had only to open a paper to escape from that vacuum—or to take a bus into the dreary hovels of the Mexican West Side, where the pecan workers live who shell pecan nuts by hand for a few cents a day. Nowhere in Mexico did I see quite so extreme a poverty. In Mexico the standard of living is appallingly low outside the great towns, but here that low standard lay next door to the American standard: the West Side hovels were mocked by the Plaza Hotel soaring yellowly up to scrape against the sky. There are one hundred and forty-seven pecan shelleries lying discreetly out of sight in San Antonio and they

shell in a good year twenty-one million pounds of nuts—a fair-sized industry. Wages had been cut recently by a cent a pound, which meant that a pecan worker could earn from thirty cents to a dollar and fifty cents a day at most. With the help of a Mexican priest, Father Lopez, the pecan workers organised a strike, though later Father Lopez retired from the direction of the strike when the Communists took it over.

This strike was the first example I had come across of genuine Catholic Action on a social issue, a real attempt, led by the old, fiery, half-blind Archbishop, to put into force the papal encyclicals which have condemned capitalism quite as strongly as Communism. But the Vatican has been many years ahead of the bishops and the laity—for years the Pope has had to meet a kind of passive resistance from the Church. (He has himself referred to the Catholic employers who in one place succeeded in preventing the reading of the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* in the churches.) Spain may have awakened the social conscience, but you cannot expect a perfect technique all at once. There was something a little pathetic about Catholic Action in San Antonio. Father Lopez had been out-manceuvred, and now the Church was trying to negotiate a settlement between workers and employers on the dubious line that the employers should open their books for the workers' representatives and if those books did not justify a cut, the cut should be restored. There was a meeting in the Mexican Park—a dry drab plain of trampled earth and a few bandstands and benches and a swing or two. An orchestra of young Catholic ladies played

cheerful and sedate airs, and then the old Archbishop and Father Lopez spoke. In the audience there were two hundred workers and a few American ladies with the fussed air of energetic slummers. There was bad management with the microphone, so that you couldn't hear much; it was very hot; and the young American girls looked pale and weak and self-conscious before the dark sensual confident faces of the half-castes—who knew instinctively, you felt, all the beauty and the horror of the flesh.

The intention was good, of course, but the performance was deplorable. One compared it mentally with the soap-box orator and the Red Flag and a crowd singing the "Internationale". Catholicism, one felt, had to rediscover the technique of revolution—it wasn't practised here among the pale violinists. And these fussy and prosperous women who stood about in little groups segregated from the workers by a few feet of dusty floor and an abyss of the spirit—good souls, I am sure, but a little too anxious that the Archbishop should have a favourable reception and not be over-tired—how would they, one wondered, have reacted to the words of St. James (quoted by Pius XI in one of his last encyclicals), "Go to now, ye rich men: weep and howl in your miseries which shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be for a testimony against you, and shall eat your flesh like fire . . ."? Those are the words of revolution—not the dim promise that account books shall be inspected (how can a Mexican worker living on thirty-five cents a day trust an account book?).

Freak Show

That night I went into a freak show in a little booth near where the West Side begins. America is entrenched around the Plaza and dies slowly out in miniature Broadways, skyscraper lights in the smooth southern sky, towards the pioneering edge of town—wooden houses and raw shows and the brothels in Matamoros Street where the hold-ups happen nightly and the local paper prints a column of them at the week-ends—the kind of city to which you picture men returning in the old days with a bag of gold for a rough and quick good time.

One didn't need a bag of gold for the freak show; one got an awful amount for ten cents in the little stuffy booth. I was the only person there; I had a sense that nobody had been for a long while—it couldn't really compete with Matamoros Street—the dry exhibits were dusty with neglect. There were a Siamese sheep—eight legs sticking out like octopus tentacles—and calves with so-called human heads (like those of morons), and dogs created upside down rolling glass eyeballs towards legs that sprouted from somewhere near the backbone, and "a frog baby born to a lady in Oklahoma".

But the high points of the exhibition were two dead gangsters—Dutch Kaplan and Oklahoma Jim, his henchman, lying in open coffins, mummified. Jim was dressed in rusty black, with a loose fly button and the jacket open to disclose the brown hollow arch of the breast, and his former leader was naked except for a black cloth across the loins. The showman

lifted it to disclose the dry, dusty, furry private parts. He showed the two scars upon the groin through which the taxidermist had removed all that was corruptible and put his fingers there (a terrible parody of St. Thomas) and urged me to do the same—it was lucky to touch the body of a criminal. He put his finger in the bullet-hole where the brains had been blasted out and touched the dingy hair. I asked him where they got the bodies from. The question irritated him. "The Crime Prevention League," he said, and changed the subject, leading me to a curtain at the booth's end. For another ten cents, he said, I could see examples of abortion, "very instructive," and a poster challenged me—"Can You Take It?" I didn't try: I was satisfied with the frog baby.

It isn't really any comfort to tell yourself that these things are probably ingenious fakes (a man with a little tail was a relic of Barnum's show); even so the fact remains that they were created by man to satisfy some horrifying human need for ugliness.

I came out again, and a little way down the flaring street America died into the dark: across waste ground, between the dimly lit saloons, Mexican labourers converged fingering guitars, picking their way across the hewn-up edge-of-town earth. I went into a variety show and saw dancers like guerrilla horses pounding across a plain: a woman stamped and sang, setting a gold-plated crucifix swinging round her neck. All round were advertisements of the next week's film—"Quién Es la Eterna Mártir".

("Whose sad face on the cross sees only this
After the passion of a thousand years.")

Laredo

So next day I got a seat in a car going to Laredo. Doc Williams drove it, with an unlit cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth, over the plain rolling like an Atlantic swell towards the border, Spanish dagger bursting into bloom at the roadside. A shabby man with a hacking cough sat in the back seat; he had come down from Detroit without luggage and his sister was dying in Laredo. He coughed and coughed and wondered whether his sister would hold out till he arrived. "Well, you can't do anything about it," Doc Williams said, chewing his cigar-end.

I asked Doc Williams if he knew anything about Rodríguez. He didn't know the name, but maybe if I asked someone in Laredo—Who? Oh, anyone. And so I came to the border, and began the aimless walking, passing the time, waiting for the car, up to the plaza and down to the river, taking a look at Mexico, back to the agent's office. The third time I began to realise there wasn't a car. I went in and said, "Well, has it come yet?" and the same man who had always answered me said, "What come?"

I said, "The car."

He said, "What car?"

It seemed to me then that there couldn't be a car at all.

A mestizo who was joking about something with the agent said, "You the gentleman who's looking for Rodríguez?"

Doc Williams had told somebody—who had told somebody else.

The agent said to me, "This gentleman's a friend of Rodríguez."

But he wasn't what you or I would call a friend. He said it wasn't any good seeing Rodríguez: Rodríguez was no good to me; he was "iñorant"; anyway, he wasn't in Laredo—he'd gone to El Paso. I said I always meant to go over the border at El Paso—perhaps I could get a car there. You won't find him, he said; he went to Brownsville. Then Brownsville . . . Oh, he was probably in Los Angeles now.

But what about the fighting, I said, over at Matamoros?

There wasn't any fighting, he said. There was just an explosion somewhere—in a factory—and people thought it was a rebellion. I could see Rodríguez's brother if I liked—he had a house in town—but I mustn't mention him: he didn't want to get mixed up in politics. Somebody would think he was spying and then he might get into a lot of trouble. Rodríguez's brother was watched by the police and by Mexican agents.

He called across the street to the ugliest money-changer of the lot. He'll tell you, he said, if Rodríguez's brother is in town.

Oh, yes, the money-changer said, scowling, he was in town. He came in last night.

I said perhaps he wouldn't want to see me.

Oh, yes, the first man said, he'd want to see me if I said I'd write a bit about his brother. That's how his brother lived, having fool newspapermen in New York write about him. Then he'd send copies of the papers to landowners right down in the south of Mexico—in Yucatán and Chiapas—and they'd think

Rodríguez was doing something for them and they'd send him money.

More people came in and listened; it seemed to me that soon everyone in Laredo would know there was an Englishman who wanted to see Rodríguez's brother. I thought perhaps I'd change my mind and go and look at Mexico instead. Why, if this snowball went on getting any bigger it might stop me from going across the bridge at all. I said I didn't want to see Rodríguez or his brother, it was all a mistake, and went out for another walk.

I went to a cinema and saw William Powell and Annabella in *The Baroness and the Butler*—it wasn't any good; then I went to Pete's bar and had a brandy and Coca-Cola highball. Pete was a Greek and had been in America for thirty-seven years, but he couldn't speak enough English for you to notice it. Germany was a fine country, he said; America was no good at all; Greece wasn't so bad—his opinions puzzled me till I realised that he judged every country by its drink laws—I suppose, if you are in the business, that's as good a way as any other. We writers are apt to judge a country by freedom of the Press, and politicians by freedom of speech—it's the same, really.

Then I went down to the river bank again and had a look at Mexico; the lights were coming out on the other side of the Rio Grande; it seemed absurd to wait any longer on *this* side: the side of the freak show and the paper edited by the local high school and the coloured comic supplement—Mr. Gump, with the horrible missing jaw and the stuck-out nose, quarrelling with Mrs. Gump week by week, year after

year; Moon Mullins and Kitty Higgins; Tarzan eternally young and brave and successful; Dick Tracy, the G man, for ever on the track.

I went back to the agent's and got a taxi; he no longer tried to pretend that a fine German car was on the way from San Antonio. We drove slowly between the money-changers to the bridge-head, I deposited five hundred pesos at the customs, and then we drove past the other bridge-head, uphill between the money-changers. This was Mexico, that was the United States. The only difference was dirt and darkness: there weren't so many lights in Mexico. They called this Nuevo Laredo to distinguish it from the town in Texas, but as so often happens the son looked older than the father, more acquainted with the seamy side of life. The streets were dark and unsurfaced, the little plaza stuffy with greenery; all the life there was went on behind the swing doors of the cantinas and billiard parlours. There was a large cockroach dead on the floor of my room and a sour smell from the water-closet. Thunder came rolling up from Texas and rain splashed and dug and churned the unmade roads. I tried to read myself to sleep with *Barchester Towers* ("St. Ewold's is not a rich piece of preferment—it is worth some three or four hundred a year at most, and has generally been held by a clergyman attached to the cathedral choir . . ."), but I couldn't concentrate. The world is all of a piece, of course; it is engaged everywhere in the same subterranean struggle, lying like a tiny neutral state, with whom no one ever observes his treaties, between the two eternities of pain and—God knows the opposite of pain, not we.

It is a Belgium fought over by friend and enemy alike. There is no peace anywhere where there is human life, but there are, I told myself, quiet and active sectors of the line. Russia, Spain, Mexico—there's no fraternisation on Christmas morning in those parts. The horror may be the same, it is an intrinsic part of human life in every place: it attacks you in the Strand or the tropics; but where the eagles are gathered together, it is not unnatural to expect to find the Son of Man as well. So many years have passed in England since the war began between faith and anarchy: we live in an ugly indifference. Over here lay the grave of Pro, Tabasco with every church destroyed, and Chiapas, where the Mass was forbidden. The advertisements for aerated waters and patent medicines line the modern highway which leads to the front line and the tourists go back and forth, their cars laden with serapes and big hats, and their minds sprightly with the legend of a happy and picturesque Mexico.

"He was content to be a High Churchman," I read of Mr. Arabin, under the bare globe, on the hard iron bedstead, "if he could be so on principles of his own, and could strike out a course showing a marked difference from those with whom he consorted." Trollope's gentle irony, the sense of breakfasts at the archdeacon's, dining-room prayers, and somewhere in the far distance, beyond the Barchester spires, a doubt about everything. A drunken voice sang in Spanish and the rain fell over the dreary Nuevo León plain, and I thought of Father Pro coming into this country in disguise—the badly cut suit and the striped tie and the brown shoes; then the secret

Masses, the confessions at street corners, the police hunts and the daring evasions—the long rainy season and afterwards the dry and then the rains again, and, when they cleared, arrest and death, unshaven, crying, “Hail Christ the King” in the yard of the prison. They had killed Campion, they said, for treason, not for his religion, and they said the same of Pro in 1927. The war doesn’t change its character in a few centuries; it moves as slowly as evolution through a thousand years—it takes more than ten centuries to change one muscle—and Pro speaks with the psychology of Thomas of Canterbury, who also was in love with the good death, “The victims are many; the number of martyrs grows every day. Oh, if only I should draw a winning number.”

The rain came down and the lights went out in the United States and Mr. Arabin made his tentative efforts at love in the flower garden.

CHAPTER TWO

THE REBEL STATE

A Good Old Man

THERE was nothing to do all morning but wait around for the man from San Antonio, who I knew would never turn up. The side streets were ankle-deep in mud, and there was nobody to talk to. It was a small town and it sank every way you walked but one into the muddy plain. That one way was the bridge: I was in looking-glass land now, staring back

at the United States. The tall Hamilton Hotel stood up clearly above Laredo; I sat in the Mexican plaza and had my shoes cleaned and looked at it. The morning was like a replica of yesterday, only reversed: the walk down to the river and back to the plaza, the morning paper. Several people had been shot by a police chief in a quarrel—that was the regular feature of a Mexican paper; no day passed without somebody's being assassinated somewhere; at the end of the paper there was a page in English for tourists. That never included the shootings, and the tourists, as far as I could see, never read the Spanish pages. They lived in a different world, they lived in a few square inches of American territory; with *Life* and *Time* and coffee at Sanborn's, they were impervious to Mexico.

Lunch was awful, like the food you eat in a dream, tasteless in a positive way, so that the very absence of taste is repellent. All Mexican food is like that: if it isn't hot with sauces, it's nothing at all, just a multitude of plates planked down on the table simultaneously, so that five are getting cold while you eat the sixth; pieces of anonymous meat, a plate of beans, fish from which the taste of the sea has long been squeezed away, rice mixed with what look like grubs—perhaps they are grubs—a salad (dangerous, you are always warned, and for a long while you heed the warning), a little heap of bones and skin they call a chicken—the parade of cooling dishes goes endlessly on to the table edge. After a while your palate loses all discrimination; hunger conquers; you begin in a dim way even to look forward to your meal. I suppose if you live long enough in Mexico you

begin to write like Miss Frances Toor—"Mexican cooking appeals to the eye as well as to the palate." (It is all a hideous red and yellow, green and brown, like art needlework and the sort of cushions popular among decayed gentlewomen in Cotswold tea-shops.) "The artistic instinct is alive even in the humblest cook."

In the afternoon I caught a train to Monterrey—I couldn't wait any longer for the car. The melancholy plain lay like lead under the rainclouds; mules in a waste of thorny scrub; mud huts and a few factories and then nothing at all until the seal-grey mountains gathered slowly round, little outcrops of rock like sailing-ships on the horizon.

There was one other tourist on the train—an old gentleman from Wisconsin, the police commissioner in some obscure town; he was armed with a walking-stick and a great many letters, letters from his state senator, from a Mexican consul, from God knows whom. He spoke no Spanish and was immensely inquisitive about inessentials, noting everything down in tiny handwriting in a tiny notebook. He was going to give a talk when he got back. He had no hesitation at all in buttonholing anyone (he buttonholed me in the end): a Mexican officer was travelling with his young wife—he cornered her because she knew a little English; he brought excitement that long afternoon into the lives of several unescorted Mexican women. No one could resent it: he was so pink and old and he had so many introductions. And a police badge under his lapel. He sat himself down opposite me and began to talk. He was a widower and he had never been out of

the States before. He had got a round-trip ticket to Mexico City and he'd arranged his side trips, here and there; he was very astute about money and very innocent; he knew exactly what he wanted to see and what he didn't; there was American management in all his hotels. I said, "I see the police chief in such and such a place has shot some men," and a safety-curtain dropped over his face. He said he thought he'd feed at Sanborn's. Though he supposed in some parts he'd have to eat strange food.

"You're all right," he said, "if you don't eat fish. Or meat. Or vegetables."

"What's left?"

"Well, there's cereals," he said.

Outside the window there was the dark coming down, the path to a white shrine far away like a snail shell, and the rain falling. He was a good man—and embarrassing as a child is. He padded up and down the compartment with his walking-stick, inserting himself between husband and wife, between a lover and his girl, saying, "What's that?" "What's that?" at trivial things. The dry and prickly desert: the cacti sticking up like pins with an effect of untidiness, and the night deepening. Paths went off into the dark gleaming with wet, going to nowhere one knew of at all.

And suddenly—I can't remember how it happened—the old, good, pink face disclosed the endless vacancy behind. You expected somebody of his age—from Wisconsin—an honorary police commissioner with a badge—to believe in God—in a kind of way, a vague, deistic way. I had imagined him saying you could worship God as well in your own home as in

a church; I had taken him already and made a character of him, and I had got him entirely wrong. He didn't believe in any God at all—it was like suddenly finding a cruel intelligence in a child. For one can respect an atheist as one cannot respect a deist: once accept a God and reason should carry you further, but to accept nothing at all—that requires some stubbornness, some courage. Three years ago he'd nearly died; the doctors had given him up; his children had gathered round the patriarchal bed. He could remember it all quite clearly; he had known what it meant, but he had felt quiet, at peace; he hadn't been scared—he was just going into nothingness. And then he hadn't died at all, and here he was, across the border in Mexico—his first trip out of the U.S.A. He had a clipping in his pocket from a Main Street paper: "Our respected fellow-townsmen—travelling in Mexico," and all the while, behind that pinkness and that goodness, eternal nothingness working its way through to the brain.

Monterrey

It was at Monterrey as though you had ben whisked back across the border into Texas—one of those bad dreams where you never reach your destination—and my time was short and my destination Tabasco and Chiapas far away in the south. The hotel was American, the rooms were American, the food and the voices all American: it was less foreign than San Antonio. This was a luxury town run for Americans on the way to Mexico City: I

couldn't understand where the old gentleman got his sense of strangeness as we sat in the bright clean restaurant eating American food, and yet he said, "It's strange, very strange; I guess I'll get on to it in time."

I made him drink a tequila—the spirit made from agave, a rather inferior schnapps. He became a little more reminiscent, a little daring over the nuts. "I embarrassed a young lady in a store once by asking for pee-cans. She took it very well." The small grossness was as unexpected on his tongue as the firm statement of disbelief had been. And all the time you were aware of goodness, a childlike goodness, flowing out of him, the kind of goodness which in reminiscence brings tears to the eyes like certain natural things you remember from many years ago—the smell of a turned field in winter, a hedge going up to a horizon of nettles.

He came tentatively out with his walking-stick to the steps of the hotel. Tequila moved like daring in his veins. I said, "What do you say to our seeing if there's a cabaret anywhere?"

He hesitated a long while; he said, "I guess I'll wait till Mexico City." He protested anxiously when I said I was going for a walk, "Now be careful. Don't get lost," staring into the wet, well-lit Monterrey streets as if they were part of the dark wilderness through which we had come.

I walked down a kind of Tottenham Court Road, cantinas and hideous fake modern furniture in shop windows, a florid and impressive statue—the Indian Juárez defying Europe which had so dismally conquered in the street behind—and then most lovely

in the dark, across a leafy square, from under a white moony colonnade, the cathedral, bells rising in dark metallic tiers towards the enormous sky, silence and dripping leaves.

I woke next morning to the sound of cheering—I had had a silly dream full of triumph and happiness. There had been a mass religious revolt under the eyes of Stalin. “You’ve let the churches be opened. You can’t stop us now.” “From this moment,” he said, “they are doomed.” I remember taking part in a procession round a small room—the dictator in the middle very stubborn and powerless and *en brosse*—and we sang “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”, but I couldn’t remember the second verse. As we turned to go, I saw a little first-class honours scientist—product of night school and a gnawing sense of exclusion—grinning in a corner and we mocked him happily, marching round the room. And then I woke to what must have set all the singing going in my dream—it was five-thirty and the crowd cheered and cheered. They might have been applauding a hero or a politician at the railway station as he passed through; perhaps the President was here. I got out of bed and looked through the window and saw darkness in the sky and the stars still out, lights burning in the flat-roofed town, and dawn like smoke in a level bank above the roofs. The cheers were everywhere, stretching out to the dim mountains: they weren’t cheers at all, but the cocks crowing for miles around, an odd Biblical rhapsody at dawn.

I went to eight o’clock Mass in the cathedral. Nearly all the people there were women; the men had probably started work many hours before. An

interior all white and gold with pale refined un-Spanish statuary, and three girls doing the Stations of the Cross, giggling and chattering from agony to agony. I remember what President Cárdenas had said in a public speech in Oaxaca, "I am tired of closing churches and finding them full. Now I am going to open the churches and educate the people and in ten years I shall find them empty." The girls giggled their way up Calvary and I wondered if Cárdenas had made a true prophecy. The very old priest at the altar knelt and rose and raised God in his hands; what did it matter in the long run, anyway? God didn't cease to exist when men lost their faith in Him; there were always catacombs where the secret rite could be kept alive till the bad times passed: during the Calles persecution God had lain in radio cabinets, behind bookshelves. He had been carried in a small boy's pocket into prisons; He had been consumed in drawing-rooms and in garages. He had Eternity on His side.

The old gentleman talked at breakfast about his bowels. He said, "When I kept you waiting I thought I only had to do one, but I found I had to do both. It's eating cereals. They keep your bowels good." He ran happily on; it might have been a dog speaking. And then he looked up from his dry wheat flakes, good and childlike and innocent, and said, "I was scared you'd get lost last night. I hoped you'd knock on my door when you went by."

Depression lifted with daylight. America after all stopped short at the hotel doors: in the Avenida Hidalgo a great bare pulled-about church hummed gently and continuously with the prayers of people

doing the Stations of the Cross. There was no ignorance in this devotion—even old peasant women carried their books of devotion and knew how to contemplate the agony. Here, one felt, was a real religion—the continuous traffic of piety. They came and moved along the walls and went and others came. They were like relays of labourers making a road up Calvary.

On a hill behind the town stood the ruined Bishop's Palace coloured delicately with olive and green age. The ranges of the Sierra Madre, grass dying out against the stony toothed ridges, lay all round, rank behind sharp rank. This palace, like a mosque in heavy broken stone, was built at the end of the eighteenth century, when religious architecture in England was dying and Baptist chapels were rising everywhere with their empty dignity enclosing the bare table and crossless hall and the tank for total immersion. Yet this ruined palace and chapel were as beautiful as anything out of the Middle Ages—I don't think it was the bullet marks which made it so, the holes knocked in the walls for Pancho Villa's machine-guns. Has the Church in Mexico, I thought, been maligned if it created works of art so late as this? I have no sympathy with those who complain of the wealth and beauty of a church in a poor land. For the sake of another peso a week, it is hardly worth depriving the poor of such rest and quiet as they can find in the cathedral here. I have never heard people complain of the super-cinemas—that the money should be spent in relief—and yet there's no democracy in a cinema: you pay more and you get more; but in a church the

democracy is absolute. The rich man and the poor man kneel side by side for Communion; the rich man must wait his turn at the confessional.

I had forgotten it was Ash Wednesday till I reached the cathedral again and found the long packed queue the whole length of the aisle lined up to receive the ashes. ("Remember, O man, that thou art dust, and shalt return to dust again.") There were as many boys and young men now as old people, for the work of the day was over. At least two hundred and fifty must have been waiting in the aisle; it took me a quarter of an hour to reach the priest, and by that time the queue had renewed itself completely and there was no sign of any slackening in the slow tide of penitence. Thousands must have received the ashes that evening. They came out again like witnesses to stream through the sunset town with the heavy grey cross on their foreheads—a few years ago and they would have suffered imprisonment for it: I began to think that after all Cárdenas had not been right. That is the danger of the quick tour, you miscalculate on the evidence of three giggling girls and a single Mass, and malign the devotion of thousands.

At dinner the old gentleman couldn't get over the joke of it: here I'd been walking miles about town and he'd gone all round in one hour by street car—for five cents American money. "But I like walking," I kept on telling him—uselessly. "I'm going to tell them that back home," he said, "about my English friend who walked all day and saved five cents American."

At night I found a little square scented with

flowers and leaves, a silent fountain, and demure courtships going on upon every bench—I thought of the couples sprawling in ugly passion on the Hyde Park grass or on chairs performing uglier acts under the shelter of overcoats. It was as if these people hadn't the need for lechery, their nerves were quieter, the marriage bed was the accepted end. They didn't feel the need of proving their manhood by pressing on the deed of darkness before its time. Fear was eliminated: they each knew where the other stood. One was not thinking, "What does she expect me to do?" nor the other, "How far can I let him go?" They were happy together in the dark bound by the rules of a game they both knew; no fear, no exasperated nerves; what was left, sentiment and the demurest sensuality—a hand on a hand, an arm along the back, the faintest of contacts. And again if only I'd known it, I was taking the tourist view—on the strength of one prosperous town on the highway, on the strength of a happy mood, I was ready to think of Mexico in terms of quiet and gentleness and devotion.

San Luis Potosi

The cacti stood in groups like people with feathered head-dresses leaning together and engaged in intimate whispered conversations—hermits who had come together in some dismal stony waste for an urgent purpose, and didn't look up to see the train pass. Roads were like the lines on a map; you saw them meandering thinly for an immense distance,

dying out at the margin among the rocks and cacti. The cacti had no beauty—they were like some simple shorthand sign for such words as “barrenness” and “drought”; you felt they were less the product than the cause of this dryness, that they had absorbed all the water there was in the land and held it as camels do in their green, aged, tubular bellies. Sometimes they flowered at the tip like a glowing cigar-end, but they had no more beauty even then: an unhealthy pink, like the icing in a cheap pastry-cook’s; the kind of sugar cake you leave upon the plate. Only sunset cast some kind of gentle humanising spell over this rocky cactus desolation—a faint gold, a subjective pity, as if one were looking at the world for a moment through a god’s anatomical and pitying eye, “He judges not as the judge judges, but as the sun falling round a helpless thing.”

Somewhere among the cacti and the stones Nuevo León gave drearily out and the state of San Luis Potosí began. I am writing now when they are waging guerrilla warfare in those hills—the day before yesterday the rebels dynamited a train and the rebel leader, General Saturnino Cedillo, is being hunted from aerie to aerie, tiny landing-ground to tiny landing-ground, and a censorship imposes silence (what has happened to one’s friends?). It is only a few months since I was there and everything is out of date already: it belongs to history.*

In those days (the first week of March 1938) San Luis Potosí was a little capitalist pocket in Socialist

* Very much out of date, for soon after this was written General Cedillo was shot by Government troops in the mountains of his own state.

Mexico, ruled less by the governor than by the Indian General, Cedillo, from his ranch among the hills at Las Palomas. For a year now they had been talking rebellion in Mexico, with Cedillo as the potential leader, one of Carranza's old Indian fighters, the man who had put down the Catholic rising in Jalisco eleven years before. Cedillo himself was born a Catholic, but he didn't practise it; he was rumoured to have a pious sister, yet the real reason why in San Luis Potosí the anti-religious laws were not enforced was the one he gave to an American reporter, "Perhaps I do not believe in all this religion myself, but the poor people want it, and I am going to see that they get what they want." For some reason, perhaps because there are no good hotels, the tourists do not get off the train at San Luis, or if they do one night at a Mexican hotel is enough for them—the dingy room, the symbolic dead beetle, and the smell of urine. Like my old friend, they catch the early-morning train to Mexico City. The old voice speaking at dawn down the room phone stirred an exaggerated emotion—goodness and simplicity are rare things; he was speaking with a little concern and anxiety because I was staying behind and he was going on alone, and I tried to reassure him. I said, "In Mexico City you're sure to find someone from Wisconsin," and rang gloomily off.

I had plenty of days ahead, more than I needed, though San Luis is a lovely town—narrow, balconied streets and rose-pink churches against a mountainous blue; an industrial city, but the industry is hidden away at the edge of town; an unhappy city, but you don't discover that at first. You notice only that your

tap doesn't run when you go to bed at night. Later you learn that there's not enough water to go round—the whole administration of the place is rotten, dependent on the General at his farm in the hills; the city is literally drained dry for the sake of *his* fields. It is useless to put all this into the past tense: there are always other generals in Mexico. Everything is repeated there, even the blood sacrifices of the Aztecs; the age of Mexico falls on the spirit like a cloud.

And then you go into the cathedral for Mass—the peasants kneel in their blue dungarees and hold out their arms, minute after minute, in the attitude of crucifixion; an old woman struggles on her knees up the stone floor towards the altar; another lies full length with her forehead on the stones. A long day's work is behind, but the mortification goes on. This is the atmosphere of the stigmata, and you realise suddenly that perhaps *this* is the population of heaven—these aged, painful, and ignorant faces: they are human goodness. Five minutes have passed and the old man's arms, weary already from the fields, are still extended; a young girl is making her aching way up the nave upon her knees carrying a baby in her arms, and behind her in the same attitude her sister—a slow sad procession towards the foot of the cross. You would say that life itself for these was mortification enough, but like saints they seek the only happiness in their lives and squeeze out from it a further pain.

Outside lies the market—a grim place at sunset, far more squalid than anything I had ever seen in the West African bush. A few potatoes, a few beans;

pottery and basket work in ugly arty shapes and colours (there were no tourists to attract: the genuine native craft takes the Chelsea-Cotswold form); hideous little toys and trinkets, and second-hand revolvers lying among the vegetables, death for a few dimes. The dust got in the throat; the cantinas were crowded and dirty—a drunken man leaned on a billiard cue. In a small cleared space a young clown performed, with painted face and long black Indian hair. He was dressed in a grey ragged night-shirt. Perhaps he was fifteen years old; he strutted before his strange surrealist laboratory—a couple of megaphones, a bottle of alcohol, a board stuck with nails, an iron, and a little brazier—the hard soles of his feet proof against steel and fire—mortification for money, the stigmata of the pleasure fair. He had a little band of grinning assistants; not one of them was more than fourteen.

A little farther on and there was the front of the seventeenth-century Templo del Carmen crowded with figures and flowers carved by Indians. When you looked closely at individual faces they were merely the old European bearded prophets with smug expressions and a Bible pressed to the breast, but when you moved away from the terra-cotta façade the effect was Indian more than Christian—a kind of turbulent materialism, bubbling grossly up towards the sky.

On the balcony of the Government offices the politicians stood all day. After Mexico I shall always associate balconies and politicians—plump men with blue chins wearing soft hats and guns on their hips. They look down from the official balcony in every

city all day long with nothing to do but stare, with the expression of men keeping an eye on a good thing.

Sunday Lunch

A Scotswoman gave Sunday hospitality over the store she'd run for many years now, ever since she'd lost her farm in one of the revolutions. Independent, outspoken, Protestant, she was a pillar of common sense among wild, shifting fanaticisms. She put everybody in his place, including Cedillo—acid, courageous, with little frank grossnesses like an Edinburgh wynd. A smell of good coffee drifted up the stairs from the store, and a daughter came in from tennis at the American Club. But there was an empty chair; it wasn't filled till near the end of lunch.

The newcomer, C., was British by blood, but he had been born in Mexico and he had a Spanish-American accent. Thin, dark, and shiny, he was a little too polite, he had a look of suburban refinement: he was the sort of person you avoid at a party. He began to explain why he was late—he had had to make a long detour driving up from Mexico City. A friend had warned him that the roads round Querétaro were unsafe because of the revolutionaries (it was the polite Mexican word for bandits). His friend the other day had lost all his money and all his clothes. He picked his words pedantically, making conversation. This was Mexican small talk.

Over the coffee a little bitterness crept in. His

father had been a rich man with estates in Morelos and he had sent his son to England to be educated; then the father's lands had been confiscated and he had sent for his son and died. The son was in a mining company now, and he looked back with a raw nostalgia to the days of Díaz. (You find them all over Mexico, hotel-keepers, old ladies, professional men remembering Díaz—whose only fault perhaps was that he forgot the poor, who have forgotten him.) He hated Mexico with a little refined adder-like hatred, but his mining experience was of no value anywhere else in the world; he was a prisoner here.

And then something opened behind the pedantry and the wormwood, a doorway into God knows what braveries and acceptances—"making the best of things," he'd call it with his reptilian bitterness. In 1927 he had been kidnapped by rebels and held for ransom together with a young American from the same mine. He had been expecting something of the sort for days, but the American didn't believe in banditry—it was too like fiction or the films—it wasn't *true*. C. used to try to scare the young man by calling out to him that the bandits were coming—the first time the American had believed it, but not again. And then the bandits *did* come. He had a few minutes' warning when they rode in and he tried to call the American out of bed. "You lay off," the young man said; "you can't scare me"—and then the room was full of them. They were looking for money and there was no money there. They pushed their prisoners against the wall. "I thought they were going to shoot. You should have seen that

American's face. I was laughing. There wasn't anything else to do. . . ."

I believed him. He had lost too much in Mexico to mind—one came across others in Mexico like that, foreigners and Spaniards who had lost everything except despair, and despair has its own humour as well as its own courage. Perhaps his laughter saved them—it must be difficult to shoot a laughing man: you have to feel important to kill. That is why a brass band plays at a cock-fight and people put on big hats and charro trousers. The bandits carried them both into the mountains and demanded a ransom of twenty thousand American dollars. For four days they were without food or water, dragged from place to place at the tails of horses, beaten. . . . Then fourteen thousand dollars were paid by their company and they were released, twenty-five miles away from home in the scrub.

"What rebels were those?"

"The Cristeros," he said. That was the Catholic rising against Calles. It's typical of Mexico, of the whole human race perhaps—violence in favour of an ideal and then the ideal lost and the violence just going on.

Cock-fight

On Sunday afternoon there was a rodeo in the bull-ring, but there wasn't enough money in the San Luis pockets for a really good company. The decorated seats of honour were empty. One had the feeling that all the activities in San Luis were half-

hearted—one eye was always fixed on the road to Las Palomas (and that eye reported many things—the Governor of Texas entertained at lunch, an American, hot and dusty carrying a lot of money with him, even poor old hunted Rodríguez's chief agent); everything went on under the shadow of future rebellion.

Two cocks were prepared for the ring. Men in big decorated cartwheel hats and tight charro trousers watched behind the fence; they had plump mild operatic faces; they might have come out of a Hollywood musical starring John Boles. They felt the cocks as if they were buying chickens in the market, plunging their fingers into the feathers; then a procession of horsemen entered, led by a band of fiddlers wearing bright-coloured serapes. They played softly and sang a melancholy chant about flowers, standing in a little group as if they were talking to each other and no one else was there. Two of the charros took little bright spurs out of beautiful red leather cases and bound them on the cocks' feet with scarlet twine, very slowly, very carefully. All this singing and procession were just a prelude to the scurry on the sand, pain in miniature, and death on a very small scale.

But death dictates certain rites. Men make rules and hope in that way to tame death—you shall not bomb open towns, the challenged has the choice of weapons. . . . Three lines were drawn in the sand: death was like tennis. The cocks crowed and a brass band blared from the stone seats and sand blew up across the arena; it was cold in the wind, in the *sombre*, among the hills. And suddenly one felt an

impatience with all this mummary, all this fake emphasis on what is only a natural function; we die as we evacuate; why wear big hats and tight trousers and have a band play? That, I think, was the day I began to hate the Mexicans. The cocks' beaks were pressed against each other, and the brass blared, and the cocks were placed on the outside lines, and the band fell suddenly silent. But the cocks didn't fight, death didn't perform; they turned their backs on each other, the spurs giving them an odd stilt-like walk, and then they stood quiet and indifferent, taking a look around, while the crowd hooted and jeered as if they had been cowardly or unsuccessful bull-fighters.

Again their metallic beaks were touched, as if an electric spark could be engendered by contact, and this time it worked. They were released quarrelling in mid-air; it was all over in a minute; there was no doubt of the victor—a great green cock who sailed above the other and forced it down by weight of feathers on to the sand. The plumage blew out like a duster, the thin bird collapsed and flattened, and there was a wicked punch, punch, punch at the eyes. It was a matter of seconds and then the beaten bird was lifted up and held head downward, until blood came out of the beak, pouring in a thin black stream as if out of a funnel. Children stood up on the stone seats and watched it with glee. The afternoon was very cold and a little rain began to fall and the rodeo was incompetent, men trying to throw horses with lassos and failing; with death over, it wasn't worth staying for all the rest: the blasts of music and the botched climax. Outside the bull-ring were the

barracks—soldiers marching up and down, up and down—and the Church of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the prison, and a tram going into town, and a drum beating.

I went into the Templo del Carmen, as the dark dropped, for benediction. To a stranger like myself it was like going home—a language I could understand—“*Ora pro nobis.*” The Virgin sat on an extraordinary silver cloud like a cabbage with the Infant in her arms above the altar; all along the walls horrifying statues with musty purple robes stood in glass coffins; and yet it was home. One knew what was going on. Old men came plodding in in dungarees on bare feet, tired out with work, and again I thought: how could one grudge them the gaudy splendour of the giltwork, the incense, the distant immaculate figure upon the cloud? The candles were lit, and suddenly little electric lights sprayed out all round the Virgin’s head. Even if it were all untrue and there were no God, surely life was happier with the enormous supernatural promise than with the petty social fulfilment, the tiny pension and the machine-made furniture. When I came out, little groups of Indians sat on the sidewalk eating their evening meal; they carried their homes with them, like tents, to be set up anywhere.

Tour of the Catacombs

I wanted to see General Saturnino Cedillo—the city owed to him so much of its happiness and unhappiness. You couldn’t drink enough water, but you

could have your children taught that Christ had risen. Catholic Action was strong in San Luis, but not even here could it be quite openly pursued: there was a Government agent in town, and for six months the priest who organised the schools had kept away from them. While I waited on in San Luis to see Cedillo—hours of waiting in the Government office for the private telephone to ring from Las Palomas, long interviews with an official, interminable assurances that I was not seeking money, that I would let no one in Mexico know that I had seen the General, and then the half-hearted consent for five days ahead—the priest showed me a few of his activities: revolution in the form of the Sermon on the Mount, treason as a class in domestic economy. Down a long narrow pink passage, past a birdcage and a few melons, a door; impossible to foresee from the street the huge space behind the door—the courtyard surrounded by small rooms where classes for girls were being held, classes in cooking, in sewing, and one for high school girls in apologetics—and the main door led to a great hall the size of a church supported by four old massive pillars. Here the weekly religious class was being held for poor girls, domestic servants and the like. The priest talked to them, gently, with many jokes—they were in the catacombs, learning the dangerous lessons of modesty and love. He was an intellectual, with a European doctorate in philosophy, but war made understanding easy between very different minds; he was like a beloved officer going the round of his company in the trenches. Outside in the town—somewhere—was the Government agent; they were

violating the Constitution; the whole building could be confiscated. He spoke very quietly, never raising his voice—he gave the effect of great confidence and great love. One thought of the blue-chinned politicians on the balcony, the leaders of the state, with their eyes on the main chance, the pistols on their hips, with no sense of responsibility for anyone at all. The girls here would go back to the daily drudgery, but they had a leader they could trust, they were not alone. We went on to a working-class school—one big room with classes graded from small children up to grown men. Fathers sat in the same room with their sons, learning to read and write, learning elementary arithmetic and sociology, the teaching of the encyclicals against capitalism and Communism. The teachers were women with Government licences—their Catholicism was secret.

Outside was complete irresponsibility—waves of it breaking over a countryside—lawless roads, the reversed signpost, the desert pressing in. It wasn't merely a question of General Cedillo at Las Palomas irrigating his own land and neglecting the state, protecting religion simply because his own people believed, believing nothing himself, with his eye for a crop and his eye for a woman, round which a dozen dark legends grew in San Luis—a protector no Catholic cared for, a capitalist no other capitalist would trust. It wasn't merely an Indian general in an obscure state of a backward country: it was a whole world. I remembered the game called "Monopoly" they were playing at home with counters and dice, the girl of fifteen on the railway-line, a world where the politicians stand on the

balcony, where the land is sold for building estates and the little villas go up on the wounded clay with garages like tombs.

The Philosopher

The priest and I went up the stairs in a dingy building near the market to find the old German teacher of languages who would come out with me to Las Palomas in case I needed an interpreter; some years before he had lived with the General and tried to teach him English and German, but there were always too many people waiting with petitions, seldom fewer than sixty a day, never any chance of a quiet time with the irregular verbs. We beat on the door for a long while, until at last it was secretively opened by a young man in a raffish grubby dressing-gown, one-eyed and pockmarked. The flat was dusty and unaired; a few books lay about on the floor, and hideous boarding-house pictures hung askew; there were a blackboard and some broken teacups. It was like a place temporarily put together by gipsies. The old professor had thin white hair, a long white moustache, and blanched and bony hands. He had an air of melancholy breeding; he was very clean and very worn; he was like an old-fashioned vase standing among the junk at the end of an auction.

He was a philosopher, he managed to insist, while he haggled gently over the pesos he was to be paid.

"Motion is life," he said, "and life is motion."

Somewhere the pockmarked boy moved restlessly like Polonius behind the tapestry.

"As for food," the old man said, "my wants are very simple; the General will know what I will like. A little vegetable, a glass of water."

He had pale yellow eyeballs; he was like a German before the Empire; you could picture him master of music in some little principality, all plush and gilt and courtesy. I wondered what odd whim of Providence had landed him here—a teacher of languages in a Mexican mining town.

That night there was a thunderstorm, the lights went out all over town, one had to find one's way back slowly to the hotel by the lightning flashes; the streets were empty and the rain came down. Did one turn left or right? It was like being forgotten in a maze when the ticket man has gone home; I thought of the good old American with vacancy behind the smooth pink skin, of the turkey breeder back home with no one to talk to and the gun under his pillow; everyone existing alone in his little personal maze and the ticket man gone.

A Day at the General's

It was four hours' drive from San Luis into the brown and stony hills. The cacti pressed up along the road, leaning towards us, turning away, a whole people rank behind rank stretching up out of sight into the mountains, waiting for someone to pass. A car went lurching by full of puffy pistoleros, churning up the dust of the unsurfaced road, but presently they broke down and we passed *them*. They too were on the way to Las Palomas—the road, I think, led

nowhere else at all, simply petered out four hours away in the General's yard.

The old German talked continuously, clasping an umbrella between his knees. His parents had died when he was very young and he had left Germany and come to Mexico. Why Mexico?

"If you are a philosopher," he rebuked me, "every place is the same. Why not Mexico?"

He had lived for decades in San Luis; he was there when Madero was jailed, he was there when Villa and Carranza fought Huerta. Men he taught became generals and later corpses; there were times when you didn't go outside your door for a few days (another month or two, if only we had known it, and the shooting was to begin again). Then a few years ago he began to go blind; it was awkward, for he lived alone.

"Awkward!" I exclaimed. "Terrifying."

Oh, no, no, he said, not to a philosopher. We bounced furiously on the back seat of the car, rising into cold mountain air. The doctors had given him up. Well, he had thought about it, he didn't believe in doctors anyway, he began to exercise his eyes and to poultice them every few hours with hot and cold towels. They began to clear, he found he could see a few yards, across a street; now his eyes were as good as they had ever been, and he gave me a long hawk-like look out of his yellow eyeballs to convince me. Bump, bump, bump, climbing into cloud.

"Never mind," he said, "it is good for you. Motion. That is my philosophy. Motion is life and life is motion."

Suddenly there was a barrier across the road, a

hut, a few men peering in. The driver said, "Las Palomas" and the Mexican business man who sat beside him and acted as my sponsor said, "General Cedillo." We were waved on. It was a private passport station set up by the General an hour and a half from his farm. The road at last stopped climbing; it came out on to the precipitous edge of the hills and curved down—so rough and narrow you felt it could be held by a few men against a regiment—towards a great flat bowl with a few signs of cultivation, tiny scratchings on the plain below, miniature trees, a roof or two. I had been told that Las Palomas itself was well hidden, and so it was—not until you were in the plain itself and the road had taken a loop round a rocky outcrop of the hills did it come into sight a few hundred yards away. But it was only the romantic notion of ignorance that the farm could be easily defended; it wasn't chosen and hidden for that purpose: a few hours after General Cedillo broke into rebellion Federal troops were in possession. It had been built with care as a place from which escape was easy—into the rough, friendly, complex hills.

We bumped slowly between a few cultivated fields towards some scattered white buildings in a dusty yard. An armed man swung the gate open, and a young dark Indian in riding breeches with a khaki topee and a scarred handsome face came down from a veranda to meet us. The veranda was crowded with politicians waiting for the General to appear, with guns on their hips, the holsters and the cartridge belts beautifully worked, a decorative death (I believe there is a law confining the carrying of arms to Government employees, but it didn't operate in

San Luis Potosí any more than in the south). We sat down in wicker chairs and the old philosopher began to talk. It was midday. He talked—for hours. The young Indian, who was the major-domo and a deputy in the state legislature, offered us beds, but we sat on. A little farther up the hillside was the General's new house, a bungalow like the one we sat in but shinier, glossier. In the yard a whirlwind, small and domestic, raised a pillar of dust; it was very hot, and the politicians stood there patiently waiting while the hours passed, waiting to get something: money, an appointment, a promise—one man had come from as far as Yucatán. A blind-from-birth boy called Tomás, with slit eyes and little unreflecting pupils, came up the stairs and felt his way jovially from face to face, laughing at his own blindness. "Someone said, 'The light's gone out.' I said, 'What's that to me?'" He was the telephonist.

Then everyone stood to attention as if a national anthem had been played, and up the stairs from the dusty yard came the General—the only man without a gun—looking except for the Indian face like any farmer, a good and well-worn suit and a coarse shirt and no tie, an old soft hat perched back from the damp bull's forehead, and one gold tooth like a flaw in character. He went from man to man, embracing them all ceremoniously—a longer embrace than usual for the old German teacher. I had thought out some formal questions to explain my visit—the sort of foolish questions newspapermen are supposed to ask—about Fascism and Communism and foreign trade and the elections two years hence. We trooped after him into another room and the questions were

read out to him; he looked puzzled, at a loss, a little angry; he said he'd answer them properly in writing—later—after food: we would find food ready for us at his house.

The major-domo led us across to the new bungalow and we drank whisky in the hideous *sala* while maids, pretty and nubile and faintly insolent, laid food. There was New Art furniture which might have come from the Tottenham Court Road and alligator skins, bought for a few pesos in Tabasco, and little statuettes and occasional tables and a framed colour print of Napoleon lying on the floor. It was like the house of a bachelor without personal taste who has tried to make a formal gesture to represent home. There was the pathos of the betwixt and between—of the uneducated man maintaining himself among the literate. On the wall was a coloured picture of the young Cedillo—the innocent Indian face under a big hat—seated on a horse, rifle in hand, a trooper in some old revolution. He didn't look like a future general—far less like a future minister. The major-domo's revolver holster creaked on the ugly easy chair and the young maid stared at us with a kind of sexual impertinence across the occasional tables. Cedillo was supposed to be dangerous—that was pathetic too among the statuettes. A man would never bring his wife or daughter here, and yet many people had a kind of affection for him—an affection for an animal whose cage you enter with caution. A year or two back he had been a very sick man; the politicians ceased to visit him—they began to prepare their change of allegiance; only a few professional men came, from a sense of pity. Then they re-

turned to San Luis and spread their legends—how many of them true, it is hard to say—of this woman and that. A lady took me on one side in San Luis and said, "If you go out to Las Palomas you must be very careful—you know what I mean—not to look at any women he has at his house, or comment. He is a very jealous man." And all the time we sat there the five hundred troops were waiting at Las Tribas for orders to move, while the dangerous man padded on his great flat feet round the farm.

The major-domo didn't eat lunch; he sat and watched us and pushed across the plates—with his dark scarred courtesy. And the old German teacher ate as if he hadn't tasted so much food for a long time, with complete absorption. Afterwards I thought we would get the answers to my questions and be off, but interviewing the General wasn't so simple as all that. We went back to the old bungalow—the General had disappeared, and the same crowd waited on the balcony. The major-domo showed the three of us into a little stuffy bedroom and went away; there was nothing to do and nothing to read but one little pamphlet on Communism published in Mexico City: it looked as if the General was doing his best to understand politics.

It was nearly five o'clock before the General appeared again, out of a shed where the electric-light plant was kept. But he didn't want to answer questions—not yet, there was a time for everything; presently I should get his replies in writing; now we were to see the farm, and off we bumped in the late golden light along the ruts of the unhedged fields, and behind at a discreet distance came another car—

with the major-domo and his gun. The sun slid behind the mountains and shot its paling rays like a torch into the sky, and a very little green showed its head above the dry fields. The General sat in the front seat; the great back and rounded shoulders reminded me of Tommy Brock in Miss Beatrice Potter's book—"he waddled about by moonlight, digging things up". Every now and then we got out and looked at a field, a crop, an irrigation canal. The night came suddenly down and we bumped back towards the yard over the hard dark ruts. Somewhere the oil engine chugged and a few lights—not many—went on correctly, and a foundry rang and rang under the blackening hills. The peasants drifted into the cookhouse, maids passed carrying tin dishes, smoke went up, and the dust of the day settled. Every now and then a car arrived and more men got out with their guns and milled boisterously on the veranda. The blind boy wandered round, roaring with laughter, feeling a stubble chin and a holster, saying, "Juan. It's Juan." If the General hadn't time for them that day, they'd stay the night and eat his food (two oxen had been killed in five days) and see him in the morning. It was all rather movingly simple and, in spite of the guns, idyllic. The peasants sat silently against the cookhouse wall, with their rugs drawn up around their mouths. The General gave them no pay, but food and clothes and shelter and half of everything the farm produced, and ready cash too if they asked for it and he had it. They even took the fifty chairs he bought for his little private cinema. And they gave him labour and love. It was not a progressive relationship, it was feudal;

you may say it was one-sided and he had everything—the New Art furniture, the statuettes, the alligator skin, and the coloured picture of Napoleon, but they possessed at any rate more than did their fellow-peasants in other states, living at best on the minimum wage of thirty-five cents a day, with no one caring if they lived or died, with all the responsibility of independence.

The General said he couldn't answer my questions that night. I had better sleep at the farm and then by midday he would be able to see me and I could get back to San Luis the next night. . . . I couldn't afford it: I had hired a car and a chauffeur. I said in that case I must be off; I wanted to be in Mexico City next day. The General blew himself out: his neck and cheeks extended like rubber. I could see from the faces of the German teacher and the business man that I had committed an atrocity. Suddenly the General gave way, sent for his secretary, and led the way into a room away from the veranda where the politicians waited.

The door blew shut and we were in the dark: the electric light had apparently failed. The obscurity was hot with the General's resentment. He grunted breathlessly near my shoulder and the business man said, "*No, señor,*" "*Si, señor,*" with immense obsequiousness. Something rattled metallically on the floor: it was the old philosopher's umbrella. Presently somebody thought of trying a switch and the light went obediently on, a bare globe beating on a cracked mirror, a few hard chairs, a miniature billiard table with a ragged cloth. The teacher began to read out my questions, and the General dictated

his answers to the secretary. He hated the whole business; you could see he didn't think in our terms at all.

Yes, he said, he believed in religious toleration ("*Soy respetuoso de todas las creencias*"), and in San Luis he had given his people toleration. Yes, he approved, too, of the new Socialist schools Cárdenas was building all over Mexico, so long as they taught children the practical things of life—but there were some teachers who were making their schools sectarian and serving "mean political interests". He hedged all the time—I don't think he could forget the Federal troops waiting at Las Tribas, the watchers and the listeners. The President's agrarian policy—the break-up of the big estates, land for the Indians—he even agreed with that, heavily diplomatic in the middle of his dark acres—but. . . .

When it came to the "buts", he sweated and rolled his eyes. He felt himself "on the spot". Questions were being asked which people didn't care to ask in San Luis—his attitude to the great trade union organisation C.R.O.M., whether he meant to stand as President at the next election—and the obsequious capitalist was listening carefully to what he said. He swelled out indignantly like a bull-frog and sweated; hospitality held him uneasily curbed. True, I was a Catholic (I could never have got leave to visit him otherwise, for he didn't receive foreign newspapermen), but he knew that Catholics regarded him with insecure gratitude. Not one of them really wished to exchange even the harsh laws of Cárdenas for his corrupt administration.

So the "buts" came rolling out. He approved of

the Agrarian Laws in principle, but they were being applied by individuals disastrously—"to serve mean political interests". As for Fascism and Communism, he didn't believe in either—he stood for parliamentary government "if possible". (He used the word democracy, but you could tell he'd been taught that. You always slipped it in when people talked politics.)

Sitting there under the bare globe near the billiard table I couldn't really believe any longer in the twenty thousand disciplined troops he was said to have at his call. Of course one doesn't trust the word of a general or a politician, but there was something genuine in the bull-frog rage, the hopeless bewilderment of the man when I asked him about the German officers. He spluttered, he turned eyes of desperate inquiry on the old teacher . . . what would his enemies say next? He was caught in a maze of friends and enemies with similar faces. That is how I see him—the young Indian trooper with the round innocent face turned middle-aged, the bitterness of political years souring the innocence. People who were his friends milked him, and he had to milk the state, and then there was a drought and the water system was antiquated and the Governor had no money to deal with it—and the trade unionists complained to the President, the President who wouldn't have been at Chapultepec now without his help, without the support of the troops which had enabled him to deport Calles. He had to get money from the state—for his friends, for his farm—and from capitalists. And capitalists wanted "things" in return, things like the suppression of labour agita-

tion, and so politics crept in. I think he was inclined to hate the man who came bothering him with questions about Fascism and Communism. He swelled and sweated and said, "Democracy." He had been happier at sunset, jolting over the stony fields in an old car, showing off his crops and his canal.

They were not to be his two months hence; I think he already felt the steady pressure to rebel. Mexico was coming to the boil. A week before, the Mexican Supreme Court had upheld the Federal Labour Board's award against the foreign oil companies. In ten days' time President Cárdenas was to sign the decree expropriating them; the machinery of propaganda was already at work which was to set the tide of patriotism flowing and to give the President the chance of settling accounts with Cedillo. Left to himself, Cedillo, I think, would have gone on hesitating. He may have enjoyed being the centre of intrigue; it was another matter altogether to sacrifice his farm and take to the mountains in middle age. But the screw was turning: that very night officers were on the way from San Luis to tell him that the military commandant of the city, who was his friend, had been removed and fresh uncontaminated troops were entering the state. A fortnight later he was to be appointed military commandant of Michoacán, Cárdenas's own state, where he would be safely shut away from his friends with all Guanajuato between him and San Luis. He pleaded illness and hung on at Las Palomas, but by that time the tide was flowing strongly, and Cárdenas made his sudden and dramatic appearance unguarded in San Luis, addressed the people in his enemy's stronghold,

accused Cedillo of preparing rebellion, and demanded the disarming of his peasantry. The war was on—at the right moment for the Government; bombs were dropped, there were skirmishes in the hills, Las Palomas was occupied, and Cedillo was chased from small landing-ground to small landing-ground. Supporters of his as far south as Las Casas in Chiapas were jailed; a general was shot near Puebla; the rebellion was over and the banditry was on—the dynamiting of trains, the useless cruelty.

Even when the General had disposed of that last question, we were not free to go. The answers had to be typed and the typescript passed. So, more long hours dragged by on the balcony with the pistoleros, a seedy American manager with a stubbled chin and a little round belly, a young scented Mexican journalist who said he'd been warned not to come—the rebellion was starting that day—and blind Tomás feeling round. At ten o'clock we were led back to the new bungalow and fed. Little fires were burning in the yard and women with cooking-pots stirred the embers; tongues of flame wavered like tiny snakes and the night pressed down. Somewhere far away a thunderstorm shifted cumbrously in the hills (a week before two peons had been killed by lightning) like cargo unloaded in a railway-yard. Two painted flashy women with fine legs sat in the *sala* waiting for the General and bed, and again the major-domo watched us eat, the revolver creaking as he passed the salad, and again the maidservant passed by, faintly impertinent with her dim suggestive smile. It was like the scene in a play which attempts too much: the business man and the bandit, the old

philosopher (tucking the food away as if he had to supply himself for a long desert march without wells or rations), the world of the flesh slinking around, and heaven cracking up outside.

We got away about eleven—the teacher had a petition to present and that kept us another half-hour. Suddenly he emerged as a family man, with a son out of work and another son who had died a few weeks before in Veracruz of infection; he had been a doctor. The General dictated a few words which would ensure his boy a position in the Government departments of San Luis, until, I suppose, the rebellion came, bringing a few violent deaths and much fun and excitement for the professional pistoleros and overtoppling here and there some small, obscure, and private life, like that of the teacher's son.

Then we drove away towards the storm. The white farm gates swung open, a man waved a rifle cheerily in the headlights, we climbed into the hills. The storm lay like a threat across the future—on the other side of the private passport station which we passed at two in the morning. The business man and the chauffeur sang side by side in the front seat and the old philosopher slept uneasily, clutching his umbrella, the fine aristocratic face with the silky white hair bobbing up and down on the torn upholstery, lit by the storm. The cacti leapt up like sentries on the mountain slopes against the green flapping light, and on either side of the pass the lightning stood for seconds at a time vibrating in the ground. It was impossible to see at all before that vivid illumination: we drove blindly from left to

right, missing the cacti by inches, coming closer and closer to the spears of fire. It was like a barrage we had to pass through—the electric fire rocketed down on the road a mile ahead. And then suddenly we swerved—turned away—outwitted it. The storm faded noisily away on our flank, and somewhere in front of us between the hills a light blinked. The old teacher slept and the business man nodded and a premature cock began tentatively to crow and then slept again; and a dead town slipped like a lantern slide before the headlights. The storm had not frightened; it had exhilarated. Lightning and the gods have always been associated; terrible, majestic, deliberate, stabbing impartially, it was like a criticism of human violence, the little decorated pistol holsters, the absurd self-importance of killers. One thought of Oklahoma Jim and Dutch Kaplan—the dried skin and the bared ribs—who thought they had ruled their roost and were now exhibited in a booth. They all—even the General—had become figures of fun under the enormous storm.

To Mexico City

Only the big decorative poster-shapes of the maguëy broke the monotonous landscape of mountain and parched plain. The scene, I suppose, was beautiful in a way, but I felt in sympathy with Cobbett, whose *Rural Rides* I had just been reading before I looked out of the window. He judged a landscape by its value to human beings—not as the Romantics did, in terms of the picturesque. The

Romantics would have enjoyed the Mexican scene, describing it as "sublime" and "awe-inspiring"; they scented God in the most barren regions, as if He were a poet of escape whom it was necessary to watch tactfully through spy-glasses as He brooded beside a waterfall or on the summit of Helvellyn; as if God, disappointed in His final creation, had fallen back on one of His earlier works. They preferred the kind of Nature which rejects man.

But Nature appals me when unemployed or unemployable—I can give only lip service to the beauty of the African bush or the Cornish coast. "The birches are out in leaf. I do not think that I ever saw the wheat look, take it all together, so well as it does at this time. I see, in the stiff land, no signs of worm or slug. The roots look well. The barley is very young; but I do not see anything amiss with regard to it." *That*, I can understand—there is no subjective judgment there—Nature is presented to us like a loaf of bread, and memory can surround the concrete words, birches, wheat, barley, with what haze of sentiment it pleases. I wondered in what terms a Mexican Cobbett would have described this barren picturesque strange land. "As villainous a tract as the world contains . . . the soil is a mixture of stone and sand . . . I have observed all the way along that the maguey is the only plant able to ripen." And then as the train drew into Huichapan, what exclamations there would have been against "the basest lickspittles of power", who under their pretence of freedom have left so many chains. And yet, though this is the tourist railroad from Laredo to Mexico City, I have seen no references anywhere in

the blithe optimistic American books to the squalor of Huichapan station.

The whole long platform was given up to beggars, not the friendly Indian women bearing tortillas and legs of chicken, preserved fruits dried in the dusty sun, and strange pieces of meat, who pass at every station down the train, not even the kind of resigned beggars who usually sit in church porches waiting dumbly and patiently for alms, but get-rich-quick beggars, scrambling and whining and snarling with impatience, children and old men and women, fighting their way along the train, pushing each other to one side, lifting the stump of a hand, a crutch, a rotting nose, or in the children's case a mere bony undernourished hand. A middle-aged paralytic worked himself down the platform on his hands—three feet high, with bearded bandit face and little pink baby feet twisted the wrong way. Someone threw him a coin and a child of six or seven leapt on his back and after an obscene and horrifying struggle got it from him. The man made no complaint, shovelling himself farther along; human beings here obeyed the jungle law, each for himself with tooth and nail. They came up around the train on both sides of the track like mangy animals in a neglected zoo. I remembered how once in a pleasure park on the outskirts of London I had come down a great sweep of beautiful treed turf, below a palace of arts where an organ was playing to thousands, and encountered tucked away in a tiny group of sheds—admission sixpence—a zoo, and no one about at all but a man with a rake and a pail. There wasn't much to be seen: a monkey scratched

in a dark corner and a tiger turned and turned in a cage a foot or two larger than itself; it was half dark and stuffy, and far away you heard the organ playing. One will never exhaust these little store-houses of human cruelty. They are tucked away like petrol from air-raids, in a street off the Tottenham Court Road, in a London park, at Huichapan—they are always there to be drawn on in case of need.

And then the capital. Troops were entraining—for San Luis Potosí. They made very little noise, small men moving in platoons, without good humour. Outside, the city was very dark, though it was not yet ten o'clock—the streets round the station were shabby, as in Paris, but the hotel was very new, too new. The room was all scarlet and black cellulose; there was a smell of paint, and the price tag hung on the chamber pot—1 peso 25.

I went out and walked down the Cinco de Mayo, shining from a shower, and into the Avenida Juárez, which smelt of sweets—the white skyscraper of an insurance office, the Palace of Arts, white and domed and dignified, the great tame trees of the Alameda, a park which is said to date back to Montezuma, expensive jewellers' and antique shops, libraries . . . it was difficult to realise that Huichapan was only a few hours away, and twelve hours off were the pistoleros waiting on Cedillo's veranda, as the lightning stabbed between the mountains. There was nothing to connect this European capital with the small wild farm and the Indians in the hills. They belonged to different continents—how could one ever help the other? This was like Luxembourg—a luxury

town. The taxis drove up the great wide handsome avenue, the Paseo de la Reforma, and a green phosphorescent R shone out on the roof garden of the best hotel, above balconies and long glass halls glowing with tubular orange lighting; gold wings at the Statue of Independence: the last Aztec monarch in dark bronze glittered like laurel bushes with the late rain. There were few people about, and most of these were American, except that in the doors of shops in the Avenida Juárez, out of the wind, crouched small Indian boys, homeless, wrapped in blankets, singing low melancholy traditional songs—but you find that, I suppose, in every capital: the untouchables under the Paris fortifications, and old women rotting at night in Regent Street doorways.

CHAPTER THREE

NOTES IN MEXICO CITY

Anatomy

How to describe a city? Even for an old inhabitant it is impossible; one can present only a simplified plan, taking a house here, a park there as symbols of the whole. If I were trying to describe London to a foreigner, I might take Trafalgar Square and Piccadilly Circus, the Strand and Fleet Street, the grim wastes of Queen Victoria Street and Tottenham Court Road, villages like Chelsea and Clapham and

Highgate struggling for individual existence, Great Portland Street because of the secondhand cars and the faded genial men with old school ties, Paddington for the vicious hotels . . . and how much would remain left out, the Bloomsbury square with its inexpensive vice and its homesick Indians and its sense of rainy nostalgia, the docks . . . ?

The shape of most cities can be simplified as a cross; not so Mexico City, elongated and lopsided on its mountain plateau. It emerges like a railway track from a tunnel—the obscure narrow streets lying to the west of the Zocalo, the great square in which the cathedral sails like an old rambling Spanish galleon close to the National Palace. Behind, in the tunnel, the university quarter—high dark stony streets like those of the Left Bank in Paris—fades among the tramways and dingy shops into red-light districts and street markets. In the tunnel you become aware that Mexico City is older and less Central European than it appears at first—a baby alligator tied to a pail of water; a whole family of Indians eating their lunch on the sidewalk edge; railed off among the drug-stores and the tram-lines, near the cathedral, a portion of the Aztec temple Cortés destroyed. And always, everywhere, stuck between the shops, hidden behind the new American hotels, are the old baroque churches and convents, some of them still open, some converted to the oddest uses—the Cine Mundial, once the Convent of Jesús María; the Government Library, once the Betlemites' church; a warehouse which was a Catholic college; a shop, a garage, a newspaper office still bearing the old façades. Between November 11th, 1931, and

April 28th, 1936, four hundred and eighty Catholic churches, schools, orphanages, hospitals were closed by the Government or converted to other uses. The National Preparatory School itself was formerly a Jesuit college, built in the eighteenth century.

Out of the Zocalo our imaginary train emerges into sunlight. The Cinco de Mayo and the Francisco Madero, fashionable shopping streets, run like twin tracks, containing smart Mayfair stations—the best antique shops, American teashops, Sanborn's, towards the Palace of Arts and the Alameda. Tucked behind them is the goods track—Tacuba—where you can buy your clothes cheap if you don't care much for appearances. After the Palace of Arts the parallel tracks are given different names as they run along beside the trees and fountains of Montezuma's park—the Avenida Juárez full of tourist shops and milk bars and little stalls of confectionery, and the Avenida Hidalgo, where hideous funeral wreaths are made, ten feet high and six across, of mauve and white flowers. Then Hidalgo wanders off where no one troubles to go and Juárez is closed by the great Arch of the Republic, which frames a sky-sign of Moctezuma Beer, and the Hotel Regis, where the American Rotarians go and the place where they draw the lottery. We turn south-west into the Paseo de la Reforma, the great avenue Maximilian made, running right out of the city to the gates of Chapultepec, past Columbus and Guatemoc and the glassy Colon Café, like the Crystal Palace, where President Huerta, the man who shot Madero and fled from Carranza, used to get drunk (when he became helpless, they turned out the lights

and people passing said, "The President's going to bed"; it wouldn't have been a good thing to *see* the President of Mexico carried to his car), on past the Hotel Reforma and the Statue of Independence, all vague aspiration and expensive golden wings, to the lions at the gates. And on either side branch off the new smart streets, pink and blue wash and trailing flowers, where the diplomats live, and the smell of sweets blows heavily along from Juárez.

Plans

I began to plan the journey I had in mind. I decided it would be necessary to go down to Veracruz and find some cargo boat there which would take me to Frontera, in Tabasco. There are no railways in Tabasco and, as far as I could make out, no roads—one must travel by water to Villahermosa, the capital, and then somehow by water again to Montecristo on the other side of the state. From there apparently I could get horses to the ruins of Palenque in Chiapas—which were my excuse for wishing to visit that state—and then if I could (these things always look so simple on a map) I would make my way by horse to the railhead in southern Chiapas, by way of San Cristobal de Las Casas.

One seemed to need some excuse of the Palenque kind—there was an uneasy conscience at work among Mexican officials on the subject of Tabasco and Chiapas. They are the only two states left where Catholics cannot receive the Sacraments of their faith except secretly, and if I had shown any particular in-

terest in politics or religion, it would have been simple enough to thirty-three me. Plenty of foreigners have been thirty-threed in the past few years.*

No one seemed to know quite what the situation was in Tabasco and Chiapas—states more isolated than Yucatán, for Yucatán has the tourist traffic to Mérida and Chichen Itzá, while there is nothing to take the tourist to these two states, except Palenque. The few visitors to Palenque, perhaps from egotistic pride, have asserted that the ruins are the equal of Chichen Itzá, yet not many people but archæologists—and visitors rich enough to charter a special aeroplane—care to face the minor hardships of the journey. There seemed to be no priests at all in Tabasco, and I was told in New York that they believed not a church was left standing—not even the cathedral.

I changed my hotel—it was too brand-new—for a dustier, noisier, more native brand, though it called itself by an Anglo-Saxon name. Here I got a room with a shower and three meals a day for 5.50 pesos, say, seven shillings. Lunch consisted of six courses with a cocktail and coffee. Music was supplied through the street door; a succession of

* To thirty-three is to exercise the right under Clause 33 of the Constitution to expel any foreigner deemed undesirable, without giving cause, at twenty-four hours' notice. The process may be an expensive one for the victim, as he has to pay the cost of an escort to the frontier. I have heard of an American woman who found herself tied to a couple of guards for several weeks. They escorted her—first-class, of course—to either Juárez or Nuevo Laredo, and then found something wrong with her papers which enabled them to hang on in her company at a Mexican hotel, charging up every drink, until her money was exhausted, when she was allowed across the frontier.

marimba players took up a collection—the marimba, gentle, sentimental, with the pleasing tinkle of a music-box. Beggars came in all through the meal (why not? It is a good strategic time) and people selling sheet music, and even rosaries, and of course lottery tickets. You couldn't get away from lottery tickets, even in the courtyard of the cathedral. I shall always associate Mexico City with the sick smell of sweets and the lottery sellers. The lottery is the next best thing to hope of heaven—there is a draw every week, with first prizes of twenty-five thousand, fifty thousand, and sometimes one hundred thousand pesos.

Cinema

I went my first night to Fritz Lang's *Liliom*, a naïve and rather moving film of heartlessness on earth and repentance in heaven. The audience was more interesting than the film; they accepted the sentiment just as any European audience would have done, but when the two messengers from God—dressed in sinister seedy clerical black—appeared beside the body and lifted *Liliom*'s soul between them into the sky, legs trailing like stuffed dolls through the firmament, they hooted and cat-called. Many got up and went out: they were not going to have anything to do with heaven or hell; only later, when they found that heaven was to be treated with whimsicality and a touch of farce, did they settle down into their seats. When I came out the streets were dark, the cantinas empty, and the air at seven thousand feet felt cold and thin and lifeless. Only a

few Indians sat on stone seats in a gawky and innocent embrace—fingers stuffed over the mouth or a great ham hand hanging over the shoulder—dungerees and shawls and no sense of passion at all.

All Boys Together

As I was returning from the bank, I heard explosions in the Francisco Madero. Crowds blocked the end of the Gante. There was another explosion and the crowd bolted—I ran with them right into a haberdashery store. A group of young men rushed by throwing water out of pails over the sidewalk and into the shops. It was the opening of the university and this the traditional “rag”—they put colouring matter into the water and if it gets on your clothes, they are ruined. Presently the police are called out, but they can never do anything: then the fire brigade, and that’s the end of the “rag”. Nobody minds, everybody thinks it a fine joke, they are all boys together. It is this boyishness, this immaturity, which gets most on the nerves in Mexico. Grown men cannot meet in the street without sparring like schoolboys. One must be as a little child, we are told, to enter the kingdom of heaven, but they have passed childhood and remain for ever in a cruel anarchic adolescence.

Nuns’ Babies

I was sitting in the lounge of my hotel waiting for lunch when an American planted himself firmly

down beside me. He was middle-aged, with a firm weak face, as if he had taken a correspondence course in personality. "You new here?" he said.

"Yes."

"Then I'll tell you a thing or two." He took a lot of papers out of his pocket—old envelopes scribbled with calculations. "I'll tell you what you got to see. An' you don't want to let them cheat you, either. There's a lot of hooey at the agencies. You can do this place cheap if you know how."

"I'm not staying long," I said, with my eye on the restaurant.

"That's just it," he said. "I can be of use to you. What's experience for unless you share it? Now you started well. This is a cheap place."

"Have you had your lunch?"

He laid a plump hand heavily on my knee and kept it there. "Now you'll want to see Cuernavaca, Taxco, Puebla—they charge you a lot at the agencies, but I looked around an' you can go to all those places for a dollar, by bus. I'll give you the addresses."

"I don't think I'll have time," I said.

"There's something you mustn't miss," he said, "and that's the hidden convent at Puebla. But you won't find all they say's there. Nuns' babies."

"Nuns' babies?"

"It's disgusting," he said. "Propaganda, propaganda all the time. I went to an agency in San Antonio, Texas. They said, 'Are you a Freemason?' I said, 'Yes.' They said, 'We've got just the thing for you. The hidden convent at Puebla. You'll be met by a Freemason. He'll give you the real goods—show you things. The bones of all these nuns'

babies.' " He paused and said with suppressed fury, "There weren't any bones of nuns' babies! It's all propaganda, propaganda, propaganda."

Frescoes

I went and saw Orozco's and Rivera's frescoes at the National Preparatory School and the Ministry of Education in the university quarter. The frescoes in the Preparatory School are mainly by Orozco. Rivera contributes only one mural with typical grandiloquence—all outstretched arms and noble faces, white robes and haloes. It is called "Creation"; it is full of literary symbols—the Tree of Life, Dionysus, Man, Woman, Music, Comedy, Dance, Tragedy, Science, Temperance, Fortitude. It adapts Christian emblems to a vague political idea, and they become unbearably sentimental in the new setting, far more sentimental than repository art. That pale blue madonna with the seven swords does, however inadequately, represent an exact idea; but the Son in Rivera's "Creation"—what is he but Progress, Human Dignity, great empty Victorian conceptions that life denies at every turn? This is always Rivera's way—to try to get the best of both worlds. He is the Leighton or the Watts of the Revolution.

Orozco—however invalid one may believe his ideology to be—knows his own mind and his own world; it is very seldom that the great abstractions—"Maternity"—billow their sentimental draperies across *his* walls. His subjects are "The Trench", "Soldaderas", "The Indian", "The Missionary", "St.

Francis", "The Eternal Father"—guyed with white woolly beard and little birdlike beak, lightning, and grumpy eyes. The Franciscan monk clasping with huge arms the starving Indian in a strangling embrace, the patient hopeless women trailing after their soldiers into the umber future, these represent emotions of pity and hate that one can respect.

In the Ministry of Education Rivera has it all his own way. Occasionally—very occasionally—his moral is where it should be, implicit, "The Rural Teacher"—the little group of Indians sitting in a circle on the baked ground, while the woman speaks to them out of a book and the trooper sits his horse, his rifle ready, and the men plough a tiny field under the mountains; "Inspection on Leaving the Mine"—the white-clothed worker standing on a plank across the abyss, head bowed and arms outstretched, while the officials search him for stolen silver. But even here we are aware of the stolen symbol—the cross, the agony.

Perhaps we have no right to criticise—Christianity itself adapted the feast days and the holy places of the older faiths. In Mexico City the cathedral is built on the site of the great Aztec temple, and perhaps we are only experiencing the uneasiness of the old Aztec priests when we turn impatiently away from these murals of rural teachers dressed in white with pious apostolic faces and fingers raised in blessing—"Suffer little children to come unto me." Perhaps they are only making things gentle for us, so that we shan't miss our faith in the new drilled totalitarian day.

"Suffer Little Children"

It was a narrow by-street in the new part of town. When I asked for Father Q. the door was slammed in my face. Perhaps I had come to the wrong house. A boy had just come out; he watched with cautious interest. I held out my letter of introduction printed with the address of a Catholic organisation in New York, and when he saw it he smiled encouragement and rang the bell for me. The door was opened, this time by a young man. He wore a stiff collar and a small bright tie—his suit looked somehow unlived in. He was Father Q.

Walking upstairs, he said it was unwise of me to have addressed a letter to him as the Reverend. Though there was a spell of quiet, at any time the Government might renew the searches and the confiscations.

The small house was active all around us—young women typewriting, men waiting for a conference: Catholic Action under way.

He was rushed: a conference was due; in an hour he had to take the train—somewhere. There was a sense of purpose and efficiency which had been absent in San Antonio. He could tell me, though, nothing about Tabasco or Chiapas. His main concern was education. It was in that field now that the battle was joined. He told me of the law that forbids religious education in the schools but does not forbid anti-religious teaching, of the provision that makes any house in which more than nine people have gathered for a religious purpose automatically

Government property. At the moment in Mexico City the police were careless; none the less, the Church tried to hold all the schools it could in houses that were half ruined and might escape the cupidity of a politician.

Even foreign schools—English and American—had to obey the Government regulations on the subject of religious teaching and to accept the Government curriculum. No school could employ unlicensed teachers, and private schools therefore had to choose their professors from a list supplied by the Secretary of Education. Naturally—as far as possible—the Ministry saw to it that only one political complexion was represented on the list. The teachers when appointed usually formed a union, and controlled the school without reference to the owner. The sexual tradition operates in odd ways and in the case of one private school, where all the nine teachers were women, they elected the doorkeeper to their union and his sex made him its leader and automatically the head of the school. Of course schools still existed in the capital staffed by Catholics, but they were secret.

Mexican education is Fascist, or totalitarian, whichever you prefer to call it. It is not democratic.* Here is an extract from Article 3 of the Constitution:

“The education imparted by the State shall be a socialistic one and, in addition to excluding all religious doctrine, shall combat fanaticism and prejudices by organising its instruction and activities

* There is still an inclination to defend the Mexican Government on the part of labour organisations. But Mexico does not follow accepted ideological lines, as we may see in the oil deals with Italy and Germany.

in a way that shall permit the creation in youth of an exact and rational conception of the Universe and of social life."

It is a little pathetic, that muddled idealism which speaks of "an exact and rational conception of the Universe": one thinks of men like Samuel Butler with hideous crippling childhoods; and in the dry Sonora or Michoacán plains, the homes of Calles and Cárdenas, childhood *was* no doubt crippled—in the Mexican way of the pistol shot and the crooked judge and the cock-fight and nobody caring for another's life. Who can blame these men if they tried to exercise responsibility? The State has certainly the right to decide what type of education the State shall pay for. It is in the second half of the same clause that totalitarianism leaks out—the revolt from irresponsibility carried too far. "Only the State—Federation, States, Municipalities—shall impart primary, secondary, and normal education. Authorisation may be conceded to individuals who desire to impart education in any of the aforementioned three levels in conformity, in every case, with the following norms:

"1. The teachings and activities of private plants must adjust themselves without exception to that indicated in the initial paragraph ['exact and rational,' etc.] and shall be in charge of persons who, in the opinion of the State, shall have sufficient professional preparation and a morality and ideology that is suitable to and in keeping with this precept." Then comes a rule that no minister or anyone connected with any religious society shall be allowed to teach or assist the schools financially.

"2. The formation of plans, programmes, and methods of teaching shall in every case rest in the State."

The State . . . always the State. What idealisms have gone to the construction of that tyrant! One thinks of the Fabians and Mr. Shaw in his Jaeger suit; and then suddenly the thing lives—and Pro receives the *coup de grâce* in the little dirty yard and no one any more is able to make the claim, "The State is I." The State is none of us; phrases like "no taxation without representation" are meaningless, because we are all taxed and no one is represented. Perhaps the only body in the world to-day which consistently—and sometimes successfully—opposes the totalitarian State is the Catholic Church. In Germany motor-cyclists distributed the Pope's encyclical secretly at night; in Italy the *Osservatore Romano* printed what no Italian paper dared to print—protests against the bombing of Guernica and attacks on open towns; and in Mexico, in a back street, the typewriter goes steadily on, and the young priest, ill at ease in his lay suit, laughs with genuine carefree mirth at his own arrest a few years back. He said, "It was the happiest time of our lives."

He was studying in a secret seminary carried on right in the heart of the city, almost next door to the National Palace. Calles was still President. Suddenly one morning the house was surrounded—two hundred troops with rifles; it might have been a secret fort packed with munitions. Fifty plain-clothes detectives suddenly filled the corridors, herded the students into one room while they searched for religious emblems or treasonable pamphlets. They

found nothing, except what Calles himself, in that moment of extraordinary infatuation, had distributed to the Press—the photographs of Father Pro's execution. These photographs had to be made the basis of a charge of treason. The pupils were packed off to jail and the seminary was confiscated. After a few days they were released—Calles had learned that making martyrs didn't pay. "It was the happiest time," Father Q. said, chuckling, remembering the camaraderie of the cells, the hope and exultation, under the light of death.

And the work goes on. A training-college for girls started at the time of the worst persecution to instruct leaders among the laity numbered six in 1926; now fifty-six thousand have been trained in theology and dogma. Catholic Action sends out instructed guides to work among those of the Government, who are licensed to take tourists round the "show places" near Mexico City, propagandising all the time against the Church; now the Church's voice begins to be heard—among the Rotarians and the earnest social workers and the amateur painters and the business men out for a good time where the dollar buys so much; trailing round old monasteries and shattered churches, with kodaks and little stools and sketch-books, here and there they encounter a Catholic voice. And that, I suppose, is treason too. For the State puts its own interpretation on the word treason—and never punishes anyone for his religion. It is the technique the totalitarian State has always employed: in the time of Elizabeth in England, just as much as in Mexico, Russia, or Germany to-day, and Champion's reply is still the valid one, "In condemning us you condemn

all your own ancestors—all the ancient priests, bishops, and kings. . . . For what have we taught, however you may qualify it with the odious name of treason, that they did not uniformly teach? To be condemned with these lights—not of England only, but of the world—by their degenerate descendants is both gladness and glory to us.”

Fun at Night

El Retiro is the swagger cabaret of Socialist Mexico, all red and gold and little balloons filled with gas, and chicken *à la king*. A film star at one table and a famous singer, and rich men everywhere. American couples moved sedately across the tiny dance floor while the music wailed, the women with exquisite hair and gentle indifference, and the middle-aged American business men like overgrown schoolboys a hundred years younger than their young women. Then the cabaret began—a Mexican dancer with great bold thighs, and the American women lost a little of their remote superiority. They were being beaten at the sexual game—somebody who wasn't beautiful and remote was drawing the attention of their men. They got vivacious and talked a little shrilly and powdered their faces, and suddenly appeared very young and inexperienced and unconfident, as the great thighs moved. But their turn came when the famous tenor sang. The American men lit their pipes and talked all through the song and then clapped heartily to show that *they* didn't care, and the women closed their compacts and listened—

avidly. It wasn't poetry they were listening to or music (the honeyed words about roses and love, the sweet dim nostalgic melody), but the great emotional orgasm in the throat. They called out for a favourite song, and the rich plump potent voice wailed on—interminably, a whole night of love. This was not popular art, or intellectual art—it was, I suppose, capitalist art. And this, too, was Socialist Mexico.

Then the Waikiki, on a lower level socially and morally. Armed policemen watched by the cloakroom (later that night the place was raided for Pérez, the drug trafficker). Lovely sexual instruments, wearing little gold crosses, lolled on the sofas; a man had passed out altogether beside a blue soda-water bottle. Small intimate parties struggled obscurely with shoulder-straps, and presently got up and made for the hotel a little way down the street. My friend thought I might be lonely and insisted on finding me an American girl—there was only one in the place, and she was called Sally. I said I didn't want her, but she obviously had for him (he was a Mexican) the glamour of foreignness. He said, "She's nice. She's refined—and interesting. You'll like to talk to her. You're a writer. She'll tell you all about her life."

I said, "I don't want to hear about her life." You could see it all around without asking questions—in the red velvet sofas and the blue soda-water bottles and the passed-out Mexican. But my friend had got a girl and he wanted me to have an American—somebody I could talk to easily. He kept on asking everybody, "Where is Sally?" and presently they found her—so there she came, picking a refined way across the dance floor, pasty, genteel and a little scared, and

very badly dressed. She said, "Yes, sir," "No, sir," "Yes, sir," to everything I said. The formality, the subservience, the terrible refinement were uncanny.

My Mexican friend said, "She's pretty, eh?" and I had to look at that infinitely plain pasty face with all the vacancy of drug-stores and cheap movies and say, "Yes, fine."

"And mine is good, too, eh? Feel her here." He pinched her thigh. "If only she didn't have all those gold teeth"—he was a dentist. "Open your mouth," he said. "Why do you have all those gold teeth?"

"I like them," she said.

"Feel her here," he said. "Go on. She is pretty good, eh?" She was, indeed—a fine young instrument of pleasure. "Go on and ask Sally about her life. You are a writer. You want to hear all about it."

"Do you like it here?" I said with embarrassment. It was like making conversation at a tea-party.

"Yes, sir."

"Better than the States?"

"No, sir."

"She is interesting," the Mexican said. "Not like mine. She is only good for one thing, eh?" and the other flashed her gold teeth at him and asked for another drink. Every time a drink came, five-centavo pieces were slipped under the girls' plates. The dentist began to talk about Huerta and Madero—he had been telling me about them at dinner.

He was the son of a rich southern landowner, but his family had lost everything in the revolution. He himself had been an army cadet at the time of Huerta's counter-revolution. He was in the National Palace when Huerta's men broke in—they had shot

Madero there in front of his eyes in the palace, or so he said. The whole story that Madero had been taken in a car towards the prison and shot in the street was a lie—he had been there, he had seen. But so, of course, others had seen—the other shooting. The historian in Mexico is lost among eye-witnesses.

Half a dozen girls in yellow bathing suits did high kicks for a few moments and disappeared. I said to Sally, "Is that all the cabaret there is?"

She said, "Yes, sir," sitting there with pasty rectitude, her hands folded in her Main Street lap.

"Got many friends among the girls here?"

"No, sir."

"What brought you here?" I said. It appeared she had married a Mexican and come across the border—so she was a Mexican citizen.

"Then he dropped you?"

"Yes, sir."

"She is very interesting," the Mexican said. "You ask her things."

Hé bit his companion's ear and she nestled against him—brown hair and dark brown Jersey eyes, a figure to pin on a wall. He began to tell jokes about Cárdenas. The President had visited Yucatán, where the henequen plantations had been divided up among the Indians. They had taken him to see Chichen Itzá. "Mr. President, nowhere else in the world are there such ruins." But he turned impatiently away and said, "They are nothing to the ones I shall leave behind me." Always in totalitarian States you get these underground jokes, a bitter powerless humour.

"Do you like Spaniards?" I asked Sally. The dull face suddenly lit up with refined fury.

"No," she said, "they are vulgar. The Mexican is a gentleman, but the Spaniard's vulgar."

"And the Indian?"

"Oh, the Indian's a fine man, sir."

The bill for drinks was enormous for Mexico. About thirty shillings. I had only five pesos left, and the Mexican dentist wanted to have his girl. "She will only cost twenty pesos," he said, "but then there is the hotel—that will be five. I have only twenty."

"I can't lend you any."

"It is very awkward." All the same, he brought her with him—the man still sat collapsed beside the soda-water bottle. He thought he might be able to borrow five pesos somewhere. I took them as far as my hotel in a taxi; it was four o'clock in the morning. I saw them trailing off down the Cinco de Mayo, the girl a little behind, brown and docile, dragging her evening dress through the grey early light.

I dreamed that a woman and I had committed a murder and buried the body, but the smell seeped up to us through the ground until the whole world seemed to carry the scent of decay.

Sunday

I went to Mass in the huge cornery cathedral—great twisted gold pillars and dark pictures of love and agony. Outside the cathedral they were selling cards consisting of small photographs of Father Pro—sitting with his superior in Belgium, his face a little sullen and immature, with heavy mouth and too

serious eyes; in a police photograph, wearing a jumper and a cheap striped tie, unshaven, the mouth sensitive now and controlled and no less obstinate; kneeling in prayer in the dreadful little execution yard behind police headquarters; standing with arms outstretched and closed eyes between the two old dummy figures used for rifle practice; lying with legs doubled up and arms still crosswise, receiving the *coup de grâce*; in the mortuary, lids not quite closed and the obstinate mouth dropping open to show the big stony teeth, and the vacant face like a mask taken off and ready for any wearer. A prayer is printed with the photographs, a prayer which they say is often answered. People preserve his relics (the dentist's mother had a handkerchief dipped in his blood): he is beatified already by popular election.

The Alameda on a Sunday is like a scene from a René Clair film: the bourgeois families under the great trees, and the photographers, with odd Edwardian painted backgrounds, all pale blue and pink, roses and châteaux and lakes and swans and absurd flying machines, dating back to the Wright brothers, lumbering overhead. Everywhere churches lift up their bruised and antique heads above the walls and trees. A Holy Child stands in a Libera Religiosa with lottery tickets spread over his outstretched arms. On the ceiling of San Fernando potentates are tossed lightly up into the cerulean, jackboots buoyed up by the enormous torrent of air, clouds thrown about like tennis balls by winged figures, an effect of freedom and jubilation (all crippling gravity cut off) as we mount to the Son of Man radiant on a blue globe.

All the world that doesn't go to the bull-fight goes to Chapultepec, and the streets of the city are empty. Chapultepec Park, as well as the Alameda, is said to date back to Montezuma: huge old trees—one of them is two hundred feet tall and forty-five feet round—draped with Spanish moss, lakes with little boats, sham caves and cold rocky tunnels out of the sun, and, on the precipitous rock above, the unoccupied castle guarded by small careless soldiers, who go wandering off into shrubberies after a girl, or sit on the parapet by the guardroom reading a cheap novel; the palace of Maximilian with a glass front like the Crystal Palace tacked on to the staid eighteenth-century stonework, and down below a monument to useless heroism—to the Cadets who fell, at the time of the American invasion, guarding the Castle. The last Cadet to survive wrapped the Mexican flag around his body and leapt from the rock—the same old flag people wear on shirts and paint on gourds for tourists, the eagle eating the snake. All the monuments in Mexico are to violent deaths.

In the paper there were two assassinations of senators. One was shot in Juárez on the American border, and the other last night three minutes' walk from my hotel, at the other end of the Cinco de Mayo, in the Opera Bar. He was plugged full of bullets after a discussion and the assassin walked away to his car and escaped from the city. These deaths are distinguished from all the other details that happen every day only by the senatorial rank. "Riddled with bullets" is the stock phrase.

Perhaps it is the atmosphere of violence—perhaps

only the altitude, seven thousand odd feet—but after a few days not many people can escape the depression of Mexico City.

A little party of peons came down the hill from Chapultepec Castle wearing big hats; they carried bread in the brims. Oh, it's comic too sometimes—in a way—like the cock-fight.

No Gold-digger

I ran into the dentist and asked him how things had gone. "I liked her," he said. "She was not a gold-digger. She accepted fifteen pesos."

The Old Friend

And then I met my good old friend from Wisconsin, mooning not very happily down the Francisco Madero. He had bought a new walking-stick—a hideous scarlet Mexican affair with painted emblems. He wasn't very happy, except that he was off home next day and was glad of that. We went back to his hotel and he took a bottle of Canadian Club out of his little black bag and made me drink a dose out of his toothglass. Then I took him in a bus out to Chapultepec. He still buttonholed everybody he saw with embarrassing directness—when he wanted to ask about buses, he put out his stick and tapped a traffic cop's gaiters. Then we went to the St. Regis and had Bacardi cocktails and got a little lit and talked of the American debt and the

Immaculate Conception, which he had thought was the same as a virgin birth—"I was married to a Roman," he said, "and she never told me any different." He was tipsily suspicious. He said the Romans in Wisconsin believed the two things were the same, anyway. Then he told me how the churches here were covered in gold, "when people went hungry," he said. And afterwards we went to Sanborn's and had waffles and sausages—"The food here's safe"—and he said to the waitress, "I want you to meet my English friend, Mr. Greene of London. I told you about him. He looked after me on the way down. I've got a joke on my friend—he went walking all day in Monterrey when I had a ride around for five cents." And he said to me, "I want you to meet my friend here who looks after me an' sees my food's hot." Then he introduced me to the black door-man—"How's your foot, Joe?"—and I saw him back to the St. Regis and we said we'd remember each other. He began to say, "You oughta meet——" and then he was swept up into a noisy gang of Rotarians from Houston, Texas, wearing little labels, and I could only catch "looked after me". I felt lonely when he'd gone, and I couldn't sleep.

Cook's Tour

One day I went on a Cook's tour to the Monastery of San Agustín Acolman and the pyramids of Teotihuacán. The monastery lies below the level of what was once all lake; it had to be abandoned more than a hundred years ago. It was founded by twelve

survivors of twenty Augustinian friars who landed in Mexico at the beginning of the sixteenth century, before the city of Mexico had fallen to Cortés. The monastery was built first and the little balcony still remains where Mass was said in view of the Indians on the plain outside. Then after twenty years, in 1539, the great tall church was completed, and one wonders how it was that twelve friars, picked at random by Providence to survive, were able to plan a building of such beauty. They planned, I suppose, on the lines of what they knew, but what an exact—and loving—memory they must have had of the Spanish monasteries. We think of these churches now as Mexican, or Colonial; but in those first decades in a continent which had been discovered less than fifty years before, in the appalling strangeness of a land which should have been over the world's edge, they must have seemed not a style of architecture, but an acre of home. In the cloisters are the remains of the oldest wall painting in Mexico—the faint line still visible of some representation of Hell and Judgment whitewashed over when that lesson had been learned by the Indians, the crude and elementary idea of punishment in terms of flame and cauldron and pincers. What remains to-day is the last and most difficult lesson of all—the lesson of love and the mysterious death of the Creator on the cross, and the little quiet European countryside, copied by Indians, still going quietly and securely on as the Universe ends: with both a sun and a moon in the sky.

In the great grey courtyard of Teotihuacán, surrounded by the platforms of small pyramidal

temples, you do get the sense of a continent over the world's edge—a flatness, a vacancy, through which peer plumed serpents and faces like gas-masks over orifices that might be the mouths of Lewis guns or flame-throwers. Archæologists maintain theories of what happened here from the number of steps in each pyramid—mathematical computations that lead to a human sacrifice or a struggle between rival cults, rather in the same way as the British Israelites foretell the future from the comparative measurements of the Egyptian pyramids. It is fantastic and credible. The mathematical sense seems to have run riot—everything is symmetrical; it is important that the Pyramid of the Sun should be sixty-six metres high and have five terraces and the Pyramid of the Moon be fifty-four metres high and have—I forget how many terraces. Heresy here was not an aberration of human feeling—like the Manichæan—but a mathematical error. Death was important only as solving an equation. In the museum you see the little black glassy knives with which the breast of the sacrifice was opened—they look as hygienic as surgeon's instruments. Only the Temple of Quetzalcoatl is decorated—with horrors, serpents, and gas-masks—and he was the white Toltec god of culture, the mildest god of the lot, and was defeated by this stony mathematical discipline. One expects to see Q.E.D. written on the paving of the great court—the pyramids adding up correctly, the number of terraces multiplied by the number of steps, and divided by the square metres of the surface area, proving—something, something as inhuman as a problem in algebra.

A young American girl, attached to two elderly ladies who complained of the heat, scrambled up to the second terrace of the Temple of the Sun and stuck—small and pale and plump and scared—on the huge slope of stone. She stared across the pyramids with amazement to where the whirlwinds moved under the mountains. The old ladies far away below like beetles sat on the grass with their backs to the pyramid and talked. She said, "All these folk have been all over the place—to Europe. This seems just wonderful to me." She had a complete lack of subterfuge, she was so completely without sophistication that she didn't even pretend, her simplicity affected you like goodness. She said, "I've never been away from my home before." It was only accident that she was here—somebody had fallen sick and someone else wanted a companion and so she'd emerged into this ancient and bloody land from her home town, a little place of five thousand inhabitants five miles from Jackson, Tennessee; she worked in Jackson, but she never even got to a cinema because she had to go straight back home after work. And here, suddenly, she was—half-way up a pyramid in Mexico: she panted and stared and gave herself away, every time she opened her mouth, generously.

Mexican Bishop

I went with Dr. C. to call on the Bishop of Chiapas. People had told me he was regarded by the Government as one of the most dangerous and astute of the Mexican bishops. A month or two before, he had

tried to return to his diocese, but he was put into a motor-car and driven back across the state border. I don't quite know what I had expected to see—some plump blue-chinned ecclesiastic with a quick eye and a cautious mouth, certainly not this unsophisticated good old man living with the utmost simplicity in surroundings of pious ugliness.

He looked like a village priest and showed a kind of humble confused embarrassment at my genuflexion. The little dark curtained room was stuffy with images and big obscure brown paintings of the love of God. No priests, he said, were officially allowed in Chiapas, although some of the churches were open now for the people to use. It was hard travelling there except in the south near the Pacific where there was the railway to Guatemala and a few roads. But in the north it was all mountain and forest and Indians who could speak no Spanish and could not even understand the language of the next village. He doubted very much whether it was possible to find a guide from Palenque to Las Casas.

San Cristóbal de Las Casas—he spoke of it with gentle regret, the old capital, before the Government removed to Tuxtla and the plain, lying eight thousand feet and more up in the mountains. It was, he said, "a very Catholic town"; there were many churches, and one in particular, Santo Domingo, was among the most beautiful in Mexico. But most of the churches of Chiapas were not like those one saw in other parts of Mexico. Chiapas had always been a poor wild state, and the churches were very simple. . . . He spoke of it gently as a foreign land to which he would never now be able to return. It touched my

imagination so that I began to regard the city of Las Casas hidden there in the mountains at the end of a mule track, with only one rough road running south, as the real object of my journey—and the beginning of going home.

1997

The booth was wedged between two shops not far from the National Preparatory School. I walked down a little dark winding passage which at every curve disclosed a brightly lighted cell—with a monk in a cowl flogging a naked woman or interrogating one by torchlight, whip in hand. The women's bodies had been constructed with tender sensuality—pink haunches and round breasts. A little Indian and his woman preceded me down the passage; they stared with blank interest—I don't think it meant a thing to them—just a woman being beaten, that was all. Why not? The evil in the little stuffy passage didn't touch them—or the propaganda. They were innocent.

Upstairs there was Trotsky (who lived in a suburb of Mexico City, in Rivera's villa, a revolver on his desk, reporters searched for arms, the villa floodlit at night and guarded by Federal soldiers—the papers were full of a Stalinist plot against his life). He wore plus fours and a little pink tie and a Norfolk jacket—a Shavian figure. Two waxwork hands in a glass case were compared, the worn worker's and the sleek priest's, but which would Trotsky's have resembled most? A waxwork Indian bent over a glass coffin

where a waxwork bishop lay in state, all gold and scarlet, and one remembered the old thin Bishop of Chiapas in seedy black and the hair shirt of St. Thomas of Canterbury. There was a little scene of an Indian hut—a dying woman and her husband and a baby or two on the floor and an empty food bowl. The priest was blessing them and the legend said, "Their capital 50 cents and they must pay one and a half pesos for a Mass."

Anti-Catholicism often goes with a curious uncritical superstition. People must have something outside the narrow world to live for—whether it is the idea of the inevitable progress of the proletarian revolution or just that a black cat will bring them luck if it crosses their path, and here, in the little rationalist anti-clerical waxwork show, was a famous gipsy woman and a baby in a cradle—and the baby was the foreigner who she had prophesied would rule Mexico in 1997, from London, the capital of the world.

Guadalupe

Guadalupe—a quarter of an hour's tram ride from the cathedral, in a suburb which retains the shape and air of a village as some parts of London do—is the most important shrine in Mexico, the centre of a whole nation's devotion. There isn't a town of any size which doesn't contain a church of Guadalupe with a facsimile of the famous relic.

The plain formal eighteenth-century church stands in a little plaza where a market is held every day of

the week—ices and fruit, little sweet corn cakes cooked while you watch and wrapped up in coloured paper like crackers, the blue Guadalupe glass, the colour of poison bottles, small crude toys. Outside the Chapel of the Well, a spring which is said to have flowed from under the feet of the Virgin, are stacks of empty whisky bottles in which to carry away the brackish healing water. Within the church the miraculous serape hangs above the altar, the dark-skinned Indian Virgin bending her head with a grace and kindliness you will find nowhere in mortal Mexico.

She appeared first at Amecameca, fifty miles away, but no one paid her any attention; then on December 9th, 1531, an Indian peasant, Juan Diego, was climbing Tepayac hill, at the foot of which the shrine now stands. The Virgin appeared to him among the rocks—there was music suddenly and light—she called him “my son” and told him to carry a message to Bishop Zumárraga that he was to build a shrine on that spot where she might watch and love the Indians. (Zumárraga was the bishop who, to the permanent grief of archæologists, burnt the Indian manuscripts in the market-place of Tlaltelolco, the town to which Diego was going to receive instruction.)

It is as well to remember how revolutionary this vision must have seemed. It was only ten years since Mexico City had fallen finally to Cortés, the country was not yet subdued, and it is doubtful what kind of greeting the average Spanish adventurer would have given an Indian who claimed to have been addressed as “my son” by the Mother of God. The

legend, one is told by Mexican politicians, was invented by the Church to enslave the Indian mind, but if indeed it had been invented at that period by the Church, it would have been with a very different purpose. This Virgin claimed a church where she might love her Indians and guard them from the Spanish conqueror. The legend gave the Indian self-respect; it gave him a hold over his conqueror; it was a liberating, not an enslaving, legend.

The Bishop, of course, disbelieved Diego. Priests and bishops are human—they share some of the prejudices of their nation and time. "My son" may have stuck even in the Bishop's throat, however much in theory he believed in his kinship with the Indian (just as the Pope's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* stuck in the gullet of the Bishop of San Luis Potosí, so that he kept it stacked in his cellar where a priest found it after Carranza's revolution). On Sunday, December 10th (the legend is well documented with dates), the Virgin appeared again to Diego on Tepayac hill and he asked her to send some more important messenger—some Spaniard, he may have implored her—whom the Bishop would believe. She might have appeared to Cortés himself, who could have commanded anything.

But the wisdom of man is nothing to the wisdom of God, and one wonders what would have been the future of that vision if it had been sent to the conqueror instead of to the conquered. Undoubtedly there would have been a rich shrine built—but would the Indians have attended it? One may be sure it would have been closed eventually like every church in Mexico, just as the vision itself would have been

overlaid in the conqueror's mind by affairs of state and politics and war. But this shrine of Guadalupe, even at the height of the persecution, remained open—no government dared to rob the Indian of his Virgin, and it helped to break the career of the only man who ever threatened it. When Garrido Canabal, the dictator of Tabasco, arrived in the capital, accompanied by his Red Shirts, to take his seat as Minister of Agriculture in Cárdenas's Cabinet, he gave private orders to his men that the shrine was to be destroyed as the Tabascan churches had already been. The image was guarded day and night and Garrido was eventually driven from Mexico to exile in Costa Rica. The Virgin of Guadalupe, like St. Joan in France, had become identified not only with the faith but with the country; she was a patriotic symbol even to the faithless. . . .

So the Virgin sent the Indian peasant back to Bishop Zumárraga, and the Bishop demanded—with not unnatural caution—a sign. For the third time Diego listened to the Virgin, who told him to return next day and she would give him the sign for which the Bishop asked, but next day Diego's uncle was very ill and he forgot—or more likely the immediate *fact* of the dying man seemed more important, more true, than a vision he may himself have discounted when the Bishop talked, full of the wisdom and the slowness and the sane scepticism of the church authority. On Tuesday, the twelfth, he had to return to Tlaltelolco to fetch a priest for his dying uncle, but he was afraid of that particular stony path he associated with his vision, and took a different way—as if he could escape the immanent Godhead and its

messenger on one path more than another. He showed the same materialism as the sceptical Catholics to-day who discount the vision because *this* Virgin was dark-skinned, apparently believing that race is an attribute of the spirit as well as of the flesh.

But Diego could not escape. The Virgin blocked his new path too, without reproach. No vision of the Mother of God has ever been associated with the idea of punishment. She told him his uncle was already well and directed him to go to the top of the hill to gather roses from the rocks and take them to the Bishop. He wrapped the roses in his serape and when he opened it to give the roses to the Bishop, the image of the Virgin was there stamped on the cloth, just as it hangs above the altar to-day.

An old Spanish lady, Señora B., was showing me Guadalupe—sceptically. She took me through the vestry into the small room where the votive paintings are hung—thanks to the Virgin expressed in little primitive daubs, like the paintings of talented children, explained in short ungrammatical sentences; a wife in bed watching her drunken husband; little men with awkward hands and pistols firing at each other: “the tragic shooting of Señor So-and-so”. Afterwards we climbed the steep winding stairs which go up Tepayac hill behind the shrine to the chapel built on the spot where the Virgin first appeared. At every corner photographers stood with their old hooded cameras on stilts and their antique screens—an early steamship, a train, a balloon, improbable aeroplanes out of Jules Verne, and of course the swans and lakes, Blue Danubes and roses, of that nostalgic period. Little braziers burned, and there

was a smell of corncake all the way up. Near the chapel is the rich man's cemetery, huge tombs with Spanish coats of arms of lichenized stone, huddling for safety near the peasants' shrine. There is no earth on Tepayac hill; it has to be carried up by human labour; and every grave must be drilled out of the solid rock.

The old lady sought for her ancestors among lanes of mausoleums like those of a new building estate where every house is different. She had lost all her money, lived in a small bed-sitting room where she entertained her grandchildren every Wednesday, the tea kettle boiling beside the bed; she had immense courage and vivacity and the will to endure. She was a descendant of a general who had fought for Iturbide and independence, and then had been exiled by Iturbide when he took the crown. But General B. could not be kept out of his country; he secretly returned and, moving from place to place, he left his features everywhere among the children of Mexico. At his death, according to his wishes, his heart went to Guadalajara, where he first met his wife, and his right arm to Lerma, where he won his victory, and the rest of his body to Guadalupe. And Señora B. retained the panache and the pride, but the aristocratic attitude, balked of the power to act, had become bitter, defiant, useless. The enemy of Cárdenas, she was also the enemy of Cedillo, whose father had been an Indian peasant on *her* family's estates in San Luis Potosí. She was too proud to choose between two evils—she was typical of many Spaniards of birth who have simply withdrawn into bed-sitting rooms and small hotels.

She was a Catholic too, but with an aristocratic scepticism. She wouldn't believe in Diego's vision and the miraculous image—it was a popular fantasy. She withdrew again, as in politics, from the source of life. It was enough for her to know that there was a parallel to this vision in Spain. She, for one, would have been more ready to accept the vision if it had come to the conqueror and not to the peasant, to the grown mind and not to the child's.

Next day I was to leave for Orizaba and Veracruz, the first stage to Tabasco and Chiapas. After a journey the Mexican Catholic returns to thank the Virgin of Guadalupe for her care; I told myself, kneeling again at the bottom of the hill before Juan Diego's serape, that I would do the same. The old lady knelt, saying her "Hail Mary"; she didn't believe—but among Catholics even the sceptical are courteous.

CHAPTER FOUR

TO THE COAST

Journey Downhill

I FELT glad to be leaving Mexico City—the shops full of tourist junk, silver filigree and gourds and rugs and dead fleas dressed up as little people inside walnuts, all the fake smartness and gaiety, El Retiro and the Cucaracha Bar and the Palace of Art, the Avenida Juárez smelling of sweets, and all the hidden hate. How right Lawrence was when he wrote, "This

city doesn't feel *right*—feels like a criminal plotting his next rather mean crime,” and again, “I *really* feel cynical about these ‘patriots’ and ‘Socialists’ down here. It’s a mess,” underlining his words like Queen Victoria. “You know Socialism is a dud. It makes just a mush of people, and especially of savages. And seventy per cent of these people are real savages, quite as much as they were three hundred years ago. The Spanish-Mexican population just rots on top of the black savage mass. And Socialism here is a farce of farces, except very dangerous.”

Dangerous it certainly was—like an electric tram gone wild, sparking and jabbing down the Embankment. In my paper, as I sat in the train waiting for it to go off (a beggar came down the aisle—you couldn't escape them even inside a train), I read that the President had signed a decree expropriating the foreign oil companies. One had been aware, of course, at the back of the mind that trouble was boiling up; but it had been boiling for nearly a year now—nobody had been expecting this sudden crazy action. Or crazy it appeared to be during those first days, when the country was stupefied and scared for its savings, and the exchange began to rocket down.

It was in the middle of December that the Federal Labour Board had published its award, after the petroleum strike of the previous summer. No need to go into all the details now—two provisions alone make it unarguably clear that no company could have accepted the award and continued operations. The working days were to be reduced to two hundred and twenty-three during the year, and workers were to be given the right to be absent from their duties

for three days on an unlimited number of occasions, for any personal or family reason, and were to be paid in full for time lost. It does not need any knowledge of book-keeping—only of human nature—to know that such an award was unworkable. On March 1, the day I got to Monterrey, the Supreme Court upheld the Labour Board's decision, but that seemed to be only the beginning of the usual interminable litigation designed to put money into the pockets of judges, counsel, and solicitors. Temporary stays, injunctions, these the companies had been able to win—no Mexican to whom I had spoken had expected this sudden climax; it must have been a rude shock to the legal profession. I was to see the immediate result in Chiapas—social services shut down, roads and reservoirs stopped, and everywhere talk of revolution.

The train pulled out by the shrine of Guadalupe. It was early in the morning, but the little tortilla stalls were already up, and the crowd was eddying round the sanctuary. It pulled away from the dingy Parisian skirts of the city, out on to the long wide plateau—white and pink haciendas with their frilly façades and their broken chapels. At every station the food-sellers came by, bearing the best food in Mexico—legs of hot fried chicken to be eaten in the fingers and tortillas wrapped round dark rich anonymous scraps of meat; and different stations had their different tourist traps—at Apizaco hideous little painted clubs and walking-sticks, at Rinconada little grey stone mortars for pounding corn made hideous with blue and scarlet birds' beaks. The volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Ixtacihuatl, were hidden in cloud,

as they had been all the time I was in Mexico City, and the Peak of Orizaba, the highest mountain in Mexico, was hidden too. Two small boys boarded the train at San Marco with guitars and played in the middle of the coach for centavos—sweet melancholy bogus voices and large brown actors' eyes. Then they went reeling over the plates, towards the Pullman. Dozens of whirlwinds fumed up across the brown plain like the chimneys of a factory city.

And suddenly after Esperanza, more than eight thousand feet up, the line comes dramatically to the edge of the plateau; it is cold there even in the mid-day sun, the air even more thin and depressing than in Mexico City. But during the next sixty-four miles the train goes down six thousand four hundred feet; it moves in great loops into summer, the seasons change as you watch, the air thickens, and exhilaration stirs in the flaccid lungs—until you begin to believe after all that this is a country to be happy in. Far away, below the huge straight wooded gorge, lies Maltrata, like a town seen from an aeroplane, a little German toy, washed clean by distance and the long rush of air; but it takes nearly an hour to get there, the train edging round and round the same mountain towards the plain. From Boca del Monte at the cliff edge to Alta Luz there are only nine miles of track, and the altitude changes by more than a thousand feet; ears buzz with the descent and it is a shock at the little station to find yourself still looking *down* at the soaring birds. Summer is advancing: strawberries and lemons are for sale; and then you are in the bottom of the valley at Maltrata only to discover it is the beginning of another descent—to Santa

Rosa, where the great scarlet tulipans are out, roses and magnolia in March, and bright yellow lemons on the trees, and, after Santa Rosa, Orizaba and the papers from Veracruz announcing that the Bank of Mexico has suspended dealings in foreign exchange and that the country remains quiet—sinister phrase.

Orizaba

Orizaba, you would say at first sight, is a town in elegant decay—within the hotel patio the doves whispered and a fountain splashed. There was a gentle moaning from an automatic organ, and an American wandered sentimentally round the bird-cages hung above the patio on the first floor, chirping gently himself. It was like an escapist's paradise—nothing new or dangerous, nothing bitter: little bridges over sharp torrential streams and the mountains pressing in and the clouds falling; hidden squares with fountains and cupids and broken bows, like a *de la Mare* poem, and the grass pushing up; flowers in private patios, and not many people about, a sense of desertion—" 'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller."

It was the Feast of St. Joseph, but even the churches were empty—except two, full of young children whose thin responses couldn't carry far. In the market flowers and flies and ordure and sleep. The long white stringy hair of a tired woman fell across a table; a young man leaned asleep against a wooden partition—black hair, consumptive face, and tipped-back chair. In the cathedral a woman wailed in what seemed to be an inexpressible physical agony

of grief and then fell silent, brushed her skirts, and rose—it had been a formal expression of a formal contrition; a peon Christ sat beaten and bleeding in his scarlet robe with no one by. A whole street of dentists' shops (it's the most thriving trade in Mexico: gold teeth everywhere) with little white-washed empty waiting-rooms and the tops of drills above the windows. The politicians sat on the balcony rail of the C.R.O.M. headquarters, doing nothing. Could anything ever happen in this place? Or would the cupid's bow just moss a little more as the flowers dropped and the clouds came lower down and somebody wailed formally in an unused church for what nobody really cares about in the warm, sweet, empty air?

The answer, of course, was that something had already happened—only six months before. Until then there had been no churches open in the state of Veracruz; Masses were said secretly, as in Chiapas, in private houses. Then one Sunday in Orizaba police agents followed a child who had been at Mass; she ran from them and they fired and killed her—one of those sudden inexplicable outbursts of brutality common in Mexico. Mexicans are fond of children, but some emanation from the evil Aztec soil seems suddenly to seize the brain like drunkenness, then the pistol comes out. The result of that death was an outburst of religious zeal all over Veracruz state; the peasants got into the churches in Veracruz itself and locked the doors and rang the bells; the police could do nothing, and the governor gave way—the churches were opened. The indignation was spent like an orgasm—sleep returned to Orizaba.

I wanted to go to confession—it would probably be my last chance before I returned to Mexico City—but it wasn't easy to find a priest who could understand English, and my small amount of Spanish could cope more easily with the simple ideas of politics than with those of human sin. Darkness began to fall; the children had left the churches to emptiness; the C.R.O.M. politicians still lazily gobbled and watched on their balcony—it was their great day, I suppose, the day of the expropriation. There would be pickings for everyone except the workers. Already it had been announced in the President's message to the people that belts had to be drawn in; though wages if possible were to be maintained, holidays and social services—everything for which the worker had been persuaded to fight—would be cut; and a great loan was to be raised to pay an indemnity to the companies. What possible hope had the worker that conditions would ever reach the old capitalist level in *his* lifetime? Oh, how weary one gets of this fight to help future generations! I wandered from church to church seeking help for myself, not for an unborn soul.

Last I came to the church dedicated to St. Joseph. Loud-speakers were braying sentimental music from the radio shops and the bells of the church clanged back. A little row of booths had been set up along the gutter where you could buy rosaries and candles and corncakes; acetylene flares flickered on the thin paper streamers blowing in the cold wind off the peak; inside the church a few women prayed before a carpet of flowers. It was a small celebration: not much money to spend, and an enormous inanition

eating away the faith. They had risen here to their great moment—the death of the child who had the thin taste of the Host still on her palate. But the great moment was over—here in Orizaba it was like Galilee between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection—all the enthusiasm had been spent.

Saint's Night

Then suddenly it became one of those evenings that conspire for happiness, when everything for awhile goes right, and during a few hours you experience peace.

Mauriac in his *Vie de Jésus* speaks of the Catholic who has the habit of frequently changing his confessor, how suddenly he will receive from a strange priest an unexpected consolation. So in Orizaba—from a thin, unshaved, impoverished man with a few words of English—one gained a sense of peace and patience and goodness, which includes, like the Roman virtue, courage and endurance. He had lived through so much; what right had an English Catholic to bitterness or horror at human nature when this Mexican priest had none? He asked me where I was going. I said Tabasco.

"Oh, an evil land," he said mildly, as he would reprove a common vice.

That night a crowd collected outside the church in the warm fresh air; little braziers burned along the pavement, and the bell clanged in the tower, shaking out sparks with every heavy oscillation. A Catherine wheel whirled in the road, and the rockets hissed up into the sky and burst in flippant and

trivial stars. The church door was open; between the dark shoulders of the crowd you could see a bearded Joseph surrounded with light; the noise of the bell and the rockets and the crowd faded out at the church door and inside was quiet and the smell of flowers. This, I felt, was how a saint's day should be celebrated—joyfully, with fireworks and tortillas, domestically.

The Morning After

Happiness never lasts long and the next morning was not so good. At early Mass one missed the mortifications of the Mexican plateau—it was more like an English Mass, sedate and unenthusiastic and familiar until one turned the head and saw a black-haired baby face working out from under a shawl—thick hair and tiny skull like a shrivelled head from Ecuador, with large brown lustrous heartless eyes. What had it to hope for in thirty years? Even Cárdenas could not procure it the certainty of thirty-five cents a day, unless perhaps it joined the army and became—one saw what it would become in the Hidalgo barracks.

The bugles played desultorily in the little pink ruined square, and the small Indian soldiers lounged in grubby uniforms outside their quarters. A woman in a white nightdress trailed a bucket across a dingy yard, and on the other side of the square was a little decaying chapel of pink stone which the soldiers couldn't enter (no soldier is allowed to attend Mass). If they *had* gone in they would have seen only a grim Christ stretched out in a glass coffin under a

white lacy cloth with a horrible open sore under the eye—a man who had been beaten up by men of their own profession. At times in these Mexican churches the separation of God and Man seems too complete: God, you may say, is on the altar—but in these churches the sanctuary light is out. He is not there, for fear of desecration. What had, I suppose, been the presbytery was now the offices of the Third Military Sector; they hemmed the little church in like something dangerous.

Beside the river a rubbish dump lay stinking under the sanitary notice forbidding it; the politicians lounged on the balcony of C.R.O.M. and everywhere leaflets lay about urging the workers and peasants of Orizaba to stand behind the President at this critical moment of the expropriation.

To Veracruz

Again, from Orizaba, the line drops, and for a while the spirit rises; man is not made to live on mountains, and when he does settle himself there for centuries, more than seven thousand feet above the sea, what can you expect but some derangement? First the Aztec and then the Spaniard, their lungs expanding to fit thin air; human kindness withering out like a flower in a vacuum flask. We were going down, dropping towards the too tropical plain. Only half-way between the two could you catch a glimpse of life as it should be.

A football game went on beside the line; half the teams just lazed on the grass; little stalls sold sweets and fruit juice and a horseman watched like a statue

between the goal-posts. . . . At Fortin the flower-sellers came crying down the train, "Gardenias, gardenias." For twenty centavos or less (say, for two-pence) you could buy a hollow cane ten inches long filled with blooms. The compartment became scented like a hothouse: flowers dangled from the luggage racks. Blooms on short stalks would be stuck in a cane, like the spokes of a star, around one scarlet hibiscus. Here you could count your blessings: the lovely baroque churches, the belief in God, the fountains and the flowers . . . it was like life before the road went irremediably wrong, before it plunged into the hot and fevered plain.

The moment passed almost as quickly as a dream, which tradition tells us lasts a few seconds only: at Cordoba politicians came on board. Like the cracked bell ringing down the stone school stairs they marked another day. They tied a streamer to the outside of the coach, leaning from the windows shouting and tugging on ropes as the train plunged down the huge ravines towards the plain. They were drunk; they carried with them, as a kind of clown to entertain them, a drunken youth with a thin wild face who flapped his hands and crowed like a cock. Awful orgasms mounted in his throat; he flapped his hands and pointed to his tongue and swilled warm beer and burst into high explanatory screams, pointing to the roof, buzzing like an aeroplane. Outside, all the vegetation died out into a black and hopeless soil; somewhere far across the flat land a lighthouse winked as the sun went down.

At Veracruz a fat homosexual porter tried to take my bag, archly. I sat in the little square in front of

the Hotel Diligencias and the fans played and the girls went round and round in the thick heat under the deep sky. Commercial men in white drill suits sat limply in the romantic night. Little bright tram-cars with open sides pulled up and pulled away like cars on a scenic railway, and somewhere music played and a Pennsylvanian with pouchy insomniac eyes warned me against Havana, staring gloomily out over the bright square. "It's awful," he said, "the things they do. I've been in Paris an' I can stand a-lot, but these Cubans . . . the things they show you." It was as if the world were being found out at last by even its most innocent inhabitants.

CHAPTER FIVE

VOYAGE IN THE DARK

"As Good a Sport . . ."

I HADN'T expected to leave quite so soon. I thought I'd stay awhile in Veracruz and get accustomed to the heat and read more Trollope and rest. It is a gay and pretty town with its little balconied houses, and shell-boxes and shell picture-frames and rosaries of shells, and the cantinas open to the street to catch whatever breezes there may be. And the shabby Villa del Mar joined by tramway to the town with its big wooden dance hall raised on piles and its little dingy houses smearing out on to the silver sandhills. A little blonde girl of two lay wearily asleep in her nurse's arms, washed out and fragile as a shell, with

her tiny ears already drilled for rings and a gold bangle round the little bony wrist—handcuffed to sophistication at birth—like goodness dying out in the hot seaport.

But I went back to town, past the bank where there was a run on the silver, people queueing up and standing on windowsills and pushing their way towards the counter to exchange their notes for silver—all because of the expropriation of the oil-fields. I pushed open the swing cantina doors of the vice-consulate, and there was the consul going through his weekly lottery tickets, seriously, as if it were a game of skill. With a sense of uneasiness I learned there was a boat for Tabasco leaving that night. The consul was American; he regarded me as a fool; he had never known a foreigner to use one of these boats before. "You don't know what you are in for," he said.

"Are they very small?"

"Small?" Words failed him. He said, "I wouldn't go in one of those boats for a thousand dollars."

"Aren't they safe?"

"They don't often sink," he said, "unless you hit a norther."

"But the norther season's over."

"You can't tell. Anyway," he said grimly, "they insure you for five thousand pesos when you buy your ticket."

And buying the ticket in the shipping office I again had the uneasy feeling that I was regarded as a fool—or ignorant; they seemed to be talking about me among themselves with pity and amusement, but chiefly amusement.

That afternoon I took a guide, a bright dapper young man like a hairdresser's assistant, round town shopping and seeing the meagre sights—the little squat church Cortés built, the oldest in America, barred and bolted and scorched by flame. A mob had tried to burn it down about two months before—their motive was not really anti-clerical (they had left the presbytery alone): it was simply to embarrass the new mayor, who was not a Veracruzian. As we got on to a tramcar, the guide met a friend, a big burly man in overalls, who laughed all the time. We left the tramcar at the first stop and sat in a cantina and drank beer. "He is always like that," the guide said, "always laughing." Nothing one could say failed to feed that enormous flame of mirth: it roared like a draught in a chimney, sucking up words like scraps of paper. "I think . . ." "Do you know . . ."—no time for a complete phrase. He was employed in the customs office, the guide said, and, "I am a customs officer for my sweetheart, too," the man bellowed mysteriously in my ear with a leer and a belch. It was like trying to read Rabelais in the original. His boisterous company melted the constraint between me and the guide—we were all friends together. The time of the guide's employment wore out; he said it was too late in the afternoon to find another customer, so he might as well stay on with me as a friend. He had come from Tabasco years ago in the same boat that I was to travel in, the *Ruiz Cano*. He said, "Nothing—nothing will ever make me go on that boat again. You don't know—it's terrible."

Perhaps, I said nervously, I wouldn't go after all. I

might change my ticket for another boat.

The customs man roared with laughter.

"The other boats," the guide said, "are smaller. The *Ruiz Cano* has a flat bottom. That is good. It will not sink easily. And they pay five thousand pesos if something happens."

"Who to?"

"Your family."

"But my family," I said, "are in England."

"Of course," he said, "they would have to prove who they were. It would not be easy. A lot of the money would be spent in lawyers' fees. It might not be worth while."

"And they wouldn't even know it was due to them."

"I tell you what," he said, "to-morrow morning I will go and see the consul and tell him you have sailed, and if anything happens he must get the money for your family." I didn't like the serious way he took this matter of the insurance; this was graveyard talk. The boat couldn't be as bad as all that.

It was. It was worse.

We came to it in a taxi with my single suitcase, bumping over the Veracruz quay. An English liner of about ten thousand tons was docked, and there were a few coasting steamers and out in the gulf a grey gunboat.

"There's the *Ruiz Cano*," the taxi-driver said.

I couldn't see it anywhere; we had passed the colliers; I looked right over the top of the ship where it lay against the quay—a flat barge with a few feet of broken rail, an old funnel you could almost touch

with your hand from the shore, a bell hanging on a worn piece of string, an oil-lamp and a bundle of turkeys. One little rotting boat dangled inadequately from the davits.

I had pictured something the size of the colliers you see in the Thames off Wapping—but this: I wouldn't have gone down the Thames in her. Forty-two hours or so in the Atlantic, in the Gulf of Mexico—I had never in my life been more frightened.

We climbed over the rail with the suitcase, and a sailor led the way down a few stairs into the engine-room, where one old greasy engine sat like an elephant neglected in its tiny house. There were two cabins close beside the engine, dark padlocked cells with six wooden shelves in each. I laid my bag on one and went gloomily up into the fading tropical afternoon. I had the feeling that my journey had only just begun; Laredo wasn't the frontier, and I thought with nostalgia of that first Mexican hotel and Mr. Arabin and the thunder cracking over the skyscraper across in the United States.

I said, "Let's go and have a drink."

The boat didn't sail till eight.

We went back to the Diligencias and ordered food and a couple of tequilas each and beer. A little girl came round selling lottery tickets and I bought one, the first I'd ever bought—a gesture to fate. After the tequilas I began to feel better, to think grandiloquently in terms of adventure. And my friend blossomed too—he wished he could accompany me. He would like to show, he said, that a Mexican was "as good a sport" as an Englishman. He would come as a friend, not as a guide. He would charge nothing.

We would ride together across Chiapas and have interesting conversations.

"Why not?" I said.

"I have no clothes."

"We could take a taxi to your house."

"No time."

"Then we could buy them in Tabasco."

The second tequila worked—wildly—in his eyes.

"All right," he said, "it is done. I will prove that a Mexican is as good a sport. . . . Just as I am, I will come with you."

We pledged ourselves in beer and shook hands drunkenly.

A little boy carrying a dog stopped on the sidewalk and stared at us. My friend called him over; he was a nephew whom he was looking after while his mother was away in Mexico City. He said, "I am going with this Englishman to-night to Tabasco. Just as I am. To prove . . . Can you look after yourself while I am away? Three, four weeks. Have you any money?"

The little boy clapped his hands with excitement. One saw in the ten-year-old eyes hero-worship. He flung his arms around his uncle's neck and embraced that little dapper man furiously. A couple of English people from the pleasure liner at a near-by table watched with intense disapproval, suspecting I don't know what Latin iniquities. We bought some ham and got into a taxi all three. The driver wouldn't take the dog, so it ran behind, gate-crashing past the sentry at the entrance to the docks. It was quite dark now; music was playing on the pleasure liner, and not a light showed on the barge, except an oil-lamp

in the bows. Little knots of people stood on the quay, somebody wept, and the turkeys rustled. My friend began to explain to everyone; they gathered round admiringly.

"I am going to-night to Tabasco. Just as I am. No clothes. Because this Englishman and I are friends. I am going to prove to him that a Mexican is as good a sport as an Englishman."

I felt myself moved by an immense self-esteem: to have evoked such a friendship, in a few hours. The little boy stood holding his dog. My friend besought him to say *now* if he could not look after himself. An old night watchman appeared at the edge of the group and offered to take last messages. Then we climbed on board, and the little boy went home with his dog, ecstatically, his uncle's great adventure in his heart.

Suddenly we were alone in the dark, and it was cold. I said I had a jumper down below which he could have. We sat on a bench and shivered. The water lapped like doubt and the turkeys moved. Then the captain came on board, a stout youngish man in shirt-sleeves who only grunted when my friend whipped out his saga—"no clothes . . . just as I am . . . as good a sport . . ."

The captain went into his tiny deckhouse and changed his trousers in the dark. The crew came on board and the other passengers: two young girls travelling with their brother, an old woman, a family which wrapped itself in rugs and lay down among the turkeys blocking the deck (you couldn't tell how many they were—they broke up later in daylight into three or four children, one at the breast, and a man

and wife). The girls sang softly in the stern, and the engine began to shake; everything knocked and rattled, and we moved a couple of feet out from the quay.

I looked at my friend; a sudden wild doubt came up into his eyes like a face at a window. I said, "Do you really want to come?"

He muttered something about his nephew—couldn't leave him alone—and scrambled on to the lifeboat. The old davits cracked under the strain—we were three feet from the quay. He gathered himself together and jumped, landing on his knees. He called out, "If I had any clothes," one reason too many, and we waved shamefacedly to each other. But he was soon cheerful again and began to tell everyone on the quay about his nephew. . . . We moved, shakily, out of earshot.

There was no light at all on the little deck and none below, only the oil-lamp in the bows. The searchlights of the English liner moved right over our heads, missing us altogether, and the captain began to write up his log by the light of an electric torch a sailor held for him. After an hour one bare globe went on outside the sleeping cells below, above a tin wash-basin, and the wind rose. We sailed in almost complete darkness into the Gulf.

The Gulf

There were no sex divisions in the dark cabin: in the bunk below me a woman lay for the whole forty-two hours, never stirring, never eating. A young school teacher was on my left hand; his shelf, when

he went on deck, was littered with pamphlets—about the petroleum dispute, about the Church. He lent them to the sailors—you came on a sailor bunched by the lifeboat absorbed in the President's message to the people. All the time the companies were appealing to the Supreme Court and the Labour Board was arguing its case the presses must have been busy with that message; long before the Supreme Court decided in favour of the workers and the companies refused to implement the award, long before expropriation was announced, the President had his message in type. It followed me everywhere: it was read out in remote Chiapas inns.

The boat rolled horribly all night. I wondered if the wind was from the north, but I no longer cared. It is before you cross a frontier that you experience fear. Now I lay there in my clothes, on my wooden shelf; with dim curiosity and wonder. It was too bizarre and inexplicable—rolling on a Mexican barge across the Gulf. Why? On my right hand the younger girl lay on her face, her legs exposed up to the thighs by the dusty light of the globe outside. The school teacher began a gentle flirtation in a protective way: he lent her a copy of the President's message and she lent him a cheap song-book: they hummed to each other softly in the oily night. My riding-boots, for which there was no room in my suitcase, rolled in a composite mass with the packet of ham, the sun helmet, and my electric torch.

In the morning I got on deck. The Atlantic rollers rode in under a grey cold sky. The girls' brother lay with sick abandon on a straw mat. A folding-table was opened, and breakfast was handed

up through a hatch in the deck from the engine-room—a loaf of bread and a plate of anonymous fish scraps from which the eyeballs stood mournfully out. I couldn't face it, and rashly made my way down to the only privy: a horrible cupboard in the engine-room with no ventilation, no flushing, and the ordure of I don't know how many days and voyages. That finished me for the rest of the day; I lay on my shelf through the morning and the afternoon and struggled up only once more before night.

And next morning everything was worse—not better. The sun was out and sucked out all the smells there were on the little ancient barge. Twice I dashed for the privy and the second time the whole door came off in my hands and fell on to the engine-room floor. Then in the late morning we came into smoother water and I got up on to the deck again—twenty feet of it on either side the smokestack, with two benches long enough to hold perhaps a dozen people. The captain stood in the bows with a toothpick in his hair, and everywhere you moved you found sailors doing up their trousers. The coast was in sight—a long low line of trees and sand like West Africa. I ate a ship's biscuit—there seemed to be cause for celebration. Thirst, though, was greater than hunger, but there was no beer nor mineral water on board; at meal times they made a shocking kind of coffee, but otherwise there was only the dubious water in a tin filter above the wash-basin, and that ran out completely after twelve hours.

Frontera

We arrived at Frontera at two-fifteen, forty-one hours from Veracruz, in an appalling heat. Only, I think, in Monrovia had I experienced its equal, but El Frontera like Monrovia is freshened a little by the sea. To know how hot the world can be I had to wait for Villahermosa. Shark fins glided like periscopes at the entrance to the Grijalva River, the scene of the Conquistadores' first landing in Mexico, before they sailed on to Veracruz. Frontera itself was out of sight round a river bend; three or four aërials stuck up into the blazing sky from among the banana groves and the palm-leaf huts: it was like Africa seeing itself in a mirror across the Atlantic. Little islands of lily plants came floating down from the interior, and the carcasses of old stranded steamers held up the banks.

And then round a bend in the river Frontera, the frontier. So it will remain to me, though the Tabascan authorities have renamed it Puerto Obregón: the Presidencia and a big warehouse and a white blanchèd street running off between wooden shacks—hairdressers and the inevitable dentists, but no cantinas anywhere, for there is prohibition in Tabasco. No intoxicant is allowed but beer, and that costs a peso a bottle—a ruinous price in Mexico. The lily plants floated by; the river divided round a green island half a mile from shore, and the vultures came flocking out, with little idiot heads and dusty serrated wings, to rustle round the shrouds. There was an election on: the name Bartlett occurred everywhere, and a red star. The soldiers stood in the

shade of the Presidencia and watched us edge in against the river bank.

This was Tabasco—Garrido Canabal's isolated swampy puritanical state. Garrido—so it was said—had destroyed every church; he had organised a militia of Red Shirts, even leading them across the border into Chiapas in his hunt for a church or a priest. Private houses were searched for religious emblems, and prison was the penalty for possessing them. A young man I met in Mexico City—a family friend of Garrido's—was imprisoned three days for wearing a cross under his shirt; the dictator was incorruptible. A journalist on his way to photograph Tabasco was shot dead in Mexico City airport before he took his seat. Every priest was hunted down or shot, except one who existed for ten years in the forests and the swamps, venturing out only at night; his few letters, I was told, recorded an awful sense of impotence—to live in constant danger and yet be able to do so little, it hardly seemed worth the horror. Now Garrido is in Costa Rica, but his policy goes on. . . . The customs officers came on board, their revolver holsters creaking as they climbed the rotting rail. I remembered a bottle of brandy in my suitcase.

Their search was not a formality. They not only went through the cargo but the captain's cabin: you could see them peering under his bunk. They felt in the lifeboat and insisted on having unlocked the little cupboard where the plates and knives were kept. Presently the passengers were summoned below to open their boxes; I allowed myself to forget all my Spanish. People came and explained things with

their fingers. I could hold out no longer and went down. But the customs men had come to the end of their tether; the heat in the cabin was terrific; everybody was wedged together—I slipped quietly away again and nobody minded. On the quay they were unloading beer—it was our main cargo: a hundred and fifty dozen bottles, to be sold only by Government agents. Puritanism pays.

I went for a walk on shore; nothing to be seen but one little dusty plaza with fruit-drink stalls and a bust of Obregón on a pillar, two dentists' and a hair-dresser's. The vultures squatted on the roofs. It was like a place besieged by scavengers—sharks in the river and vultures in the streets.

One introduction I had here, to the merchant who owned the warehouse on the quay, an old man with a little pointed beard who spoke no English. I told him I wanted to go to Palenque from Villahermosa. He tried to dissuade me—it was only a hundred miles, but it might take a week. First, as there were no roads for more than a few miles outside the capital I should have to return to Frontera, then I'd have to wait till I could get a barge up another river to Montecristo—or Zapata, as it was now called. There I could get horses. But the river journey would take two or three days and conditions would be—horrible. After all, I said, I had endured the *Ruiz Cano*. The *Ruiz Cano*, the old man said, was a fine boat. . . . I went back to the ship discouraged. They were still unloading beer; they wouldn't be moving that night, for it was still ten hours to Villahermosa and they needed daylight for the passage.

At sunset the mosquitoes began—a terrifying

steady hum like that of a sewing-machine. There were only two choices: to be eaten on deck (and probably catch malaria) or to go below to the cabin and the appalling heat. The only porthole was closed for fear of marauders; mosquito-nets seemed to shut out all the air that was left. It was only eight o'clock. I lay naked under the net and sweated; every ten minutes I tried to dry myself with a towel. I fell asleep and woke again and fell asleep. Then somewhere I heard a voice talking English—hollow over-civilised English, not American. I thought I heard the word "interpreter". It must have been a dream, and yet I can still remember that steady cultured voice going on, and the feel of my own wet skin, the hum of mosquitoes, and my watch saying 10.32.

The River

I went for a walk with one of the sailors and we drank sweet unpleasant fruit drinks at a stall in the market and he tried—rather hopelessly—to sell me his secondhand crocodile-skin notecase for three pesos, about the price you pay for a whole crocodile. Then at nine-thirty we got under way up the monotonous, not unbeautiful river, shaking and rattling into the interior. There is always something exhilarating about moving inward from the sea into an unknown country. All the way along, the low banks were lined with bananas or coconut palms; sometimes a tributary stream ambled muddily off to God knows where.

A sailor came and told me there was a second gringo on board: he was sitting on the bench the

other side of the smokestack. The boat was crowded now with passengers from Frontera, where he had come on board sick, unshaven, in an old black greasy hat. He wasn't very good to look at, sitting there with his mestizo wife and two blond washed-out little boys with transparent eyelids and heavy brown Mexican eyes. I couldn't foresee that I was to spend, oh, days in his company.

He was a dentist, an American; Doc Winter, and he hadn't been out of Frontera to Villahermosa for five years. But yesterday a long sickness had reached its climax; he said, "If I don't get away, I guess I'll die." He had tried to walk the two hundred yards to the ship to take his passage, but he couldn't make it. He had to send his wife, and this morning, well, he'd just struggled down and reached the bench, and he guessed he wouldn't move from there for an hour or two. In Villahermosa there was an English doctor—he didn't talk much English and he'd never been out of Mexico, but he was English all right—Dr. Roberto Fitzpatrick, and he would fix him up. It was the stomach, but what he most wanted was just a change of air, and the big stubbly western face sniffed for a breeze on the hot listless river.

I couldn't help wondering what had landed him in Frontera, the only foreigner there, and how he made a living in that dreary little river port. The answer to the second problem was, of course, gold fillings; I might have guessed that: they flashed at you from every face, like false *bonhomie*. He had the best practice, he said, in Frontera, for apparently that tiny town supported at least three. The people preferred to come to him rather than go to their own country-

men, who treated them like dogs. So his colleagues hated him. They wouldn't have hesitated, he said, at murder—if they had had the guts. Once a gunman did play for him—came to his consulting-room and instead of sitting down in the chair pulled a gun. Doc Winter was younger in those days: he'd kicked the man in the stomach and sent his gun flying and landed him on the point of the jaw. He groaned slightly as the engines rattled, and sniffed greedily for air. He was like the tough case of something labelled fragile.

What a country! he kept on exclaiming. God, what a country! He had to get Japanese drills from Mexico City because they were cheap, and they never lasted—sometimes they broke down after a single use. How he longed to get out, but what a chance! Every time you made money there was a revolution. And now this oil business and the exchange falling—he heard you could get five pesos for a dollar in Mexico City. Oh, things had been all right once in Tabasco—in the days when people still used mahogany furniture. There were a lot of American traders then, in timber. That was why you had names like Bartlett among the Mexicans. They came down after the Civil War from the South and intermarried and forgot their own tongue and took Mexican citizenship. But now there was no money left in Tabasco: everything was just rotting into the rivers.

"Well," I said, "I suppose things are better than in Garrido's time."

Not on your life, he said. There was discipline in those days. . . . Garrido was right, only his friends went too far. "Why," he said, "that woman there,

my wife, she's his niece. I was Garrido's dentist in Villahermosa. He never went to anyone else."

"Did he pay you?"

"I never sent a bill," he said. "I wasn't that crazy. But I got protection." All that was wrong with Garrido was—he went against the Church. It never pays, he said. He'd be here now if he hadn't gone against the Church.

"But he seems to have won," I said; "no priests, no churches. . . ."

"Oh," he said illogically, "they don't care about religion round here. It's too hot."

That was incontestable—the heat increased not only as the day advanced, but as the boat screwed farther in to Tabasco. "Frontera's nice and fresh," the dentist said, "not like Villahermosa." At about two o'clock in the afternoon we went aground—backed furiously, swung this way and that, driving right up against the bank, slid off and landed—hopelessly—on sand. Our luck was in: we had chosen the only place in the whole river where there was another ship to help us. We hadn't been there twenty minutes when she came chugging round a bend, dragging a chain of barges laden with bananas. It had been intolerably hot, motionless there on the shoal, and we cried out to them to let us have some bananas; and casually, as you might throw feed to chickens, they threw great bunches on board—a hundred or more fruit to a bunch—as if they were weeds. Then they attached a chain and dragged us off. "Comrades," the captain called, raising his fist.

With the dark, the early hasty tropic dark, the fire-

flies came out—great globes of moving light, like the lamps of a town, flickering over the banana trees. Sometimes a canoe went by paddled by Indians—white and silent and transparent like a marine insect, and the oil-lamps in the bow and stern gave a sharp theatrical appearance to the sabre leaves on the bank. The roar of the mosquitoes nearly extinguished the sound of the engines; they swarmed across from the banks and shrivelled against the oil-lamps. I wondered nervously what would happen if we went aground now, with no hope of release till daylight and nearly fifty passengers on board and the mosquitoes drumming in. And then, of course, we did begin to go aground. Somebody shone an electric torch on a man in the bows taking soundings; the ship moved backwards and forwards, swung this way and that—inches at a time. Cries came up to the little dark bridge—naming the soundings—“*seis, siete,*” and then quickly down to “*tres*”. Then the electric light would wane and die and a new bulb be fitted in. “*Seis, siete, cuatro.*” For nearly half an hour we sat there in the river, swinging gently, before we got through.

And then suddenly, about eleven hours from Frontera, Villahermosa burst out at us round a bend. For twelve hours there had been nothing but trees on either side; one had moved forward only into darkness; and here with an effect of melodrama was a city—lights burning down into the river, a great crown outlined in electricity like a casino. All felt the shock—it was like coming to Venice through an uninhabited jungle—they called, triumphantly, “*El puerto, el puerto!*” and in the excitement we nearly

ran aground for a third time—the bow swung round and dipped into the bank.

CHAPTER SIX

THE GODLESS STATE

Garrido's Capital

THAT effect of something sophisticated and gay in the heart of a swamp did not outlast the night—it was the swamp that lasted. I never, till the day I left, discovered what building had shone like a crown through the night—there certainly wasn't a casino, and the lights I had seen were not visible when once one was an inhabitant.

We tied up to a steep mud bank crowned by a high dark wall; under the shadow of Villahermosa—"the beautiful city"—the lights had all gone out. In the obscurity we could make out faces as the fireflies went by. A plank fifteen feet long bridged the mud river, to the mud bank, and somebody switched on an electric torch to guide us. I began to slide on down the bank until a man took my arm and propelled me upwards. By the light of an electric torch I saw a policeman—or a soldier. He took my suitcase and shook it, listening for the clank of contraband liquor. It was like landing at the foot of a medieval castle: the ramp of mud and the old tall threatening walls and a sense of suspicion.

One came, as it were, through a crack in the walls to the only possible hotel, which stood in a small

plaza on the main landing quay. An electric dynamo filled the hallway and the hotel itself began on the first floor at the head of a wide staircase, where an unshaved malarial creature sat rocking up and down in a wicker chair talking to himself. My room was a huge bare apartment with a high ceiling and a tiled floor and a bed set down somewhere in the middle. There was a private shower which put the price up by a peso a day, and it was only later that I found it didn't work; now, after the boat's dark cell, this room was luxury.

Somewhere music was being played: it came faintly down the hill to the riverside through the sticky night. I followed it to the plaza. I was excited and momentarily happy: the place seemed beautiful. Under the trees of the little plaza the young men and women promenaded, the women on the inner circle, the men on the outer, moving in opposite directions, slowly. A blind man dressed carefully in white drill with a straw hat was led by a friend. It was like a religious ceremony going on and on, with ritualistic repetition—indeed it was the nearest to a religious ceremony you were allowed to get in Tabasco. If I had moved a camera all round the edge of the little plaza in a panning shot it would have recorded all the life there was in the capital city—a dentist's, with a floodlit chair of torture; the public jail, an old white-pillared one-storey house which must have dated back to the Conquistadores, where a soldier sat with a rifle at the door and a few dark faces pressed against the bars; a Commercial Academy, the size of a village store; the Secretariat; the Treasury, a florid official building with long steps leading down to the

plaza; the Syndicate of Workers and Peasants; the Casa de Agraristas; a few private houses with tall unshuttered windows guarded with iron bars, through which one saw old ladies on Victorian rocking-chairs swinging back and forth among the little statues and the family photographs. A public dance was going on with faded provincial elegance—you could see the couples revolving at a slant in the great brewery mirrors marked "Cerveza Moctezuma". At nine-thirty promptly all the main lights—the groups of four globes like balloons which stood at each corner of the plaza joined by ugly trailing overhead wires—went out. And I suppose the dance came to an end. For this was the puritan as well as the Godless state.

I went back to the hotel to bed and began to read *Dr. Thorne*, "There is a county in the west of England not so full of life indeed, nor so widely spoken of as some of its manufacturing leviathan brethren in the north, but which is, nevertheless, very dear to those who know it well. Its green pasture, its waving wheat, its deep and shady and—let us add—dirty lanes, its paths and stiles, its tawny-coloured, well-built rural churches, its avenues of beeches . . ." Trollope is a good author to read in a foreign land—especially in a land so different from anything one has ever known as this. It enables you to keep touch with the familiar. A cockchafer came buzzing and beating through the room and I turned out the light—the light went out all over Barsetshire, the hedges and the rectories and paddocks dropped into darkness, and as the cockchafers buzzed and beat one felt the excitement of this state where the hunted priest

had worked for so many years, hidden in the swamps and forests, with no leave train or billet behind the lines. I remembered the confessor saying to me in Orizaba, "A very evil land." One felt one was drawing near to the centre of something—if it was only of darkness and abandonment.

A Day in the Beautiful City

Something went wrong with my watch in the night, so that I presented my only letter of introduction at seven-thirty in the morning when I thought it was ten-thirty. The man was away by plane, visiting a hacienda, but his wife received me with perfect courtesy as if she was used to foreigners arriving at that hour. We spoke of the Church in Tabasco (she was a Catholic), sitting in a little dark room out of the heat with her mother. There was no priest, she said, left in Tabasco, no church standing, except one eight leagues away, now used as a school. There had been one priest over the border in Chiapas, but the people had told him to go—they couldn't protect him any longer.

"And when you die?" I said.

"Oh," she said, "we die like dogs." No religious ceremony was allowed at the grave. The old people, of course, felt it most—a few weeks before they had smuggled the Bishop of Campeche in by plane to see her grandmother who was dying. They had money still . . . but what could the poor do?

I went back to the hotel: heat and flies, heat and flies. I found the dentist there, but not his family. "That woman—my wife, you know, she's staying

with relations. A man's gotta be alone sometimes." He had shaved and was looking better. "Maybe to-morrow," he said, "we'll go for a walk—up to the plaza." There was a continual sour smell from the river like decaying fruit and a continuous thirst—every time I passed through the plaza I had a drink, of warm, sweet, gaseous chemicals. By the end of the day I had got through two bottles of beer, four and a half bottles of various mineral waters, and one bottle of so-called cider, as well as coffee, three large cups of it. As for the food, it was unspeakable, worse than anything I had eaten or was to eat in Mexico. The hotel served no food, and there was only one restaurant in town—flies and dirty tablecloths and meat on the point of turning in this wet oven of a place, and a proprietor in a kind of yachting cap. And it was expensive, too, by Mexican standards—eighteenpence a meal.

I went and saw the chief of police, a big, blond, cheery creature with curly hair, dressed too tightly in white drill, with a holster at his fat hip. He laughed aloud when he saw my passport, putting an arm round my shoulder with that false Mexican camaraderie. "That's fine," he said, "fine. You've come home. Why, everybody in Villahermosa is called Greene—or Graham."

"Are there English people in the town, then?"

"No, no," he said. "The Greenes are Mexicans."

"I'd like to meet one."

"Come back this afternoon at four and I'll introduce you."

On the way down from the plaza I met the dentist again—he had struggled out a hundred yards or so

and stood at a street corner spitting. "Revisiting old haunts," he said. "Well, well, that's the Southern Banana Company now; it used to be . . . and that clock, that clock's been there ten . . . twenty years."

"Seen the doctor yet?"

"All in good time," he said. "I don't want to hurry. I know what's wrong. Why, I drank iced milk in New Orleans thirty years ago. That acted just the same. The trouble is I took a purge this morning. I oughtn't to have done that. It's locked me. Seen my family?"

"No."

"They're out looking for me," he said. "They've been at the hotel. Don't you tell them I'm around."

Heat and flies, heat and flies. I felt a dreadful inanition at the thought of the journey I had to make and all the things I must buy for it: hammock, serape, kettle, snake-bite remedy. I got the last in a bottle, Dr. Somebody-or-Other's snakebite cure—take a dessertspoonful right away, and then another spoonful every half-hour till the bottle is empty. Everybody said it was a good thing, but what happens if you get bitten twice? That's your bad luck, I suppose.

Then I went and saw the aviation company. I couldn't face the idea of that long double river journey to Montecristo.

I think there were only two classes of men I really liked in Mexico—the priests and the flyers. They were something new in Mexico, with their pride in history, their dash, their asceticism; non-drinkers and non-smokers living a mess life together in the only clean well-built house in Villahermosa, brilliant

flyers, if a little less than efficient as mechanics. I hadn't been in the office ten minutes before I was being lectured on Cortés. I said I wanted to get a guide if I could from Palenque to Las Casas, which was the old capital of Chiapas before the politicians moved down into the plain, to Tuxtla. It will be a fine journey, the man said, if you can make it—you'll know what Cortés had to face in heavy armour on his march to Guatemala. And when the manager came in—an American airman, once Garrido's pilot, but forbidden now by Mexican law to fly a passenger plane—he, too, talked of Cortés: the problem of where he landed in Tabasco and what was the old course of the Grijalva—he had flown over it time and again with that in mind. Once again my plans had to be altered. I could fly to Montecristo instead of making the long river journey, but there wasn't a reliable guide, they said, to be obtained there or at Palenque. The best thing was to fly to Salto de Agua, where there was a storekeeper who would help me first to a guide to Palenque and then to a guide to Yajalon, a village in the mountains. In Yajalon there was another storekeeper they could recommend who would find me a guide to Las Casas; and, what was better still, a Norwegian lady who spoke English lived there. From Las Casas everything was easy—a kind of road going south to Tuxtla, and from Tuxtla there was a regular air service to Oaxaca or Mexico City. But I'd just missed a plane to Salto; now I should have to wait—nearly a week.

A whole century separated these men—trained in the States, with their quick bird's-eye view of Mexico, their self-discipline—from the other inhabitants of

Villahermosa, from the chief of police whom I tried to see again that afternoon. The appointment was for four; I sat on a bench in the courtyard of the police station for an hour. The dirty whitewashed walls, the greasy hammocks, and the animal faces of the men—it wasn't like law and order so much as banditry. The police were the lowest of the population: you had to look for honesty on the faces of the men and women waiting to be fined or blackguarded. You gained an overwhelming sense of brutality and irresponsibility as they took down their rifles from the rack and sloped away on patrol or ambled drearily across the yard in the great heat with their trousers open. These were the men who a few weeks later were to fire into a mob of unarmed peasants attempting to pray in the ruins of a church. I got tired of waiting in the end, and one of the policemen was assigned to hunt out the chief of police with me. We walked from one end of town to the other through the hot afternoon, looking in all the billiard parlours, but we couldn't find the chief.

I had dinner with the dentist; he was feeling better, but a little hunted: his family had been into the hotel again looking for him. A lottery seller came round and suddenly I remembered the ticket I had bought in Veracruz—it seemed a month ago. There it was in the long list of the smaller prizes—I had won twenty pesos with my first ticket. That sold the lottery to me: I bought at least a small share in a ticket in every town I came to, but I never won again. The dentist and I took a walk up to the plaza and sat down. You couldn't call it the cool of the evening: there was no cool. The old ladies sat swinging, swing-

ing, and the parade went by. A young Mexican dentist called Graham joined us—he had known my dentist when he worked in Villahermosa—and presently in the parade the Señoritas Greene went by—raven hair, gold teeth, and the dumb brown eyes of Mexicans. It was astonishing that some young women in this place—of open drains and no water but the river—did manage to present themselves with a cleanness, a freshness, an *esprit*. . . . The dentist sang softly to himself, “I don’t like the food. I don’t like the food,” and something about “Your eyes of blue,” fanning himself with his straw hat. Then he’d chew a while and spit and murmur, “No sugar in my urine” (he had apparently got to the doctor after all), and, “Your stomach’s the whole thing.”

In the night beetles woke me, thumping against the wall. I killed two—one in the very centre of the great tiled floor, but when I woke there wasn’t a sign of it. It was uncanny. Had I dreamed? Then I looked for the other and found it surrounded by ants, which swarmed up in relays between the tiles. They must have eaten the first one altogether. It had been a bad night. I had thought feverishly over and over again of the opening of a short story—all through the night stuck in an opening paragraph, like a needle in a cracked record—and I woke with a thick throat, so that it was difficult to swallow: the effect of the green sour river outside. I tried to write my story, but the indelible pencil melted on my hand.

A Victorian Adventurer

It is curious how the most dismal place after

twenty-four hours begins to seem like home. Even the *Ruiz Cano*. And now this town. It is, of course, fear of the next step. "Envy me, envy me," a character remarks in one of Stevenson's stories, "I am a coward." And it is something to have some emotion to cherish in a place like Villahermosa, even if it's only fear. I began to cling to what I knew—the big tiled room, the fly-plagued restaurant, the walk uphill to the plaza, and to the people—the dentist and Dr. Roberto Fitzpatrick.

Dr. Fitzpatrick was an elderly Scotsman who had never been out of Mexico—not even to the States. He talked his native language slowly and brokenly, telling me of the fly in Chiapas which sends you blind, showing me horrible medical photographs and a scorpion in a little glass bottle. No one looking at this small man with the stubbly grizzled beard, the quick Latin movements, and the steel spectacles would take him for British. He had been absorbed nearly as completely as the Greenes and Grahams, and there was something rather horrifying and foreboding in this—for an unabsorbed Greene. Time goes so slowly: a few days were like months at home. Señorita Greene went swinging round the plaza on the evening promenade; and one found oneself haunted by fancies, as if fate intended to take in its octopus coils yet another Greene. . . . The chief of police had—forcibly—kept his promise and summoned a rather scared Greene to see me in the police-station. His name was De Witt Greene; he had Dutch, American, English, and pure Indian blood in him, for his grandfather, who had come from Pennsylvania after the Civil War, had married a

cacique's daughter. His great-grandfather had come from England.* As we walked across the plaza together he had pointed—"There's another Greene"—at a seedy Mexican, with a drooping hat and a gun on his hip, descending the Treasury steps.

But Dr. Fitzpatrick was saved from complete absorption by an immense family pride. Sitting in the Victorian *sala* of his home, among the shiny mahogany furniture, the occasional tables, and the little china ornaments and picture-frames, I looked at old faded photographs, testimonials of his dead brothers who had been educated in the States; Tom, with a great spade beard, and brilliant Cornelius, who had died young—somewhere far back in the nineties. There was a gold medal from Seton Hall, New Jersey, and school reports (he was top in every class) and a letter from the warden to his father and yellowed clippings from a local paper about the degree celebrations in Orange and Cornelius Fitzpatrick's name underlined in old tarnished ink. . . . But most remarkable of all was the father. There are heroic adventurers the world knows nothing of: papers recording incredible achievements rot in old drawers, houses in the Midlands still surrender astonishing secrets; but one had not expected to find in Villahermosa the record of such an adventure. Dr. Fitzpatrick took down from a shelf a little calf-bound notebook with loose torn leaves, the diary his father had kept when he came to Mexico in 1863 seeking a

* The other day, reading in d'Urfey's anthology *Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1720), I came across a Mr. Witt Greene, the author and composer of a formal Restoration song—"Never Sigh but Think of Kissing" Certainly family migration may be a daunting thing.

practice to support his wife Anna and his two-year-old baby Tom. (He had left England in 1857 at the age of twenty-seven, married a girl from a New Orleans convent, and never, I believe, saw England again unless for a brief period before he tried his fortunes unsuccessfully in Africa.)

He had left the two of them in New Orleans, and his first attempt to make a living petered miserably out in Tampico, now the great hot ugly oil port. Then came his first stupendous adventure of which the record, alas, has been lost! There remains in the existing diary only the brief statement, "A year ago to-day I left Tampico with forty-seven cents, to walk to New Orleans"—three hundred odd miles to the present Mexican border, and more than twice that distance more through Texas and Louisiana. He stayed in New Orleans a few months only; stubborn and Scotch, he set out again, this time to Panama, where, for some unknown reason, he imagined there were good prospects for a doctor. From this time on we have the day-to-day entries of his disillusionment and laconic despair.

As a Scottish Catholic he was shocked by the condition of the Church in Panama; as a lonely young man of thirty-one, who had very little Spanish, he found himself consorting more and more with the disreputable and kindly Padre Rey. His brief entries build up a pathetic picture of his disapproval and his grudging friendship for this bizarre priest who lived with his wife and daughter (he said in excuse that he had married her before he became a priest) and kept live mice in a glass lamp. Stories about the Bishop of Panama reached Dr. Fitzpatrick's ears. A girl was

about to have a child, and Dr. Fitzpatrick asked whether the rumours were true—that the Bishop was the father. "Not this time, I think," said Padre Rey. . . . It wasn't the sort of Catholicism Fitzpatrick had been used to in Scotland.

And all the time his money was draining away and no patients came. On Christmas Day he was reduced to eight dollars, and he felt an intolerable loneliness, thinking of "my beloved Anna and dear little Tom". He posted letters which she would probably never receive, and got none himself. Then at last, with the help of Padre Rey, he found a patient and earned enough money to take his passage on a boat for Salvador—it was at least a little nearer to the States.

Then began the second great adventure. Salvador was at war with Guatemala, but in spite of that, without money and without arms and without Spanish, he took a horse and rode nine hundred and ninety-seven miles (he was always exact in his calculations) to the Atlantic, seeking in vain for a home and a practice—across Salvador (arrested as a spy and released), across Guatemala (meeting the Indian dictator with his soldiers in the field) and into Mexico, right across Chiapas, climbing the eight thousand feet to cold Las Casas, then down again into Tabasco and the tropical heat, and so to the sea. There is nothing in the diary to show he was conscious of the magnitude of his adventure; Indian superstitions, native medicines described with medical frankness, so many miles covered—most of the entries are Scotch in brevity and matter-of-factness. Only at moments when he thinks of Anna and Tom (he doesn't even know if they are still alive: he left them in the midst

of the American Civil War) does the individuality of the young homesick man break through into the diary. Once he sang "God Save the Queen" to keep his spirits up, climbing a mountain in Chiapas.

It is pleasant to know that he found his way safely back to New Orleans, that his wife and baby were well, and that eventually they all found prosperity—in Villahermosa of all places. His reputation as a doctor extended to Mexico City and across the Gulf to Mérida: he was called in by Porfirio Díaz to treat his wife, and died in 1905, in Campeche—a town he had always hated—on his way to see the Governor of Yucatán. There are photographs in the Mexican *sala* where the unpublished record lies on a shelf—Anna, a middle-aged woman in a crinoline, with one of those calm Victorian faces that hide years of the wildest anxieties; "dear little Tom", looking like a Dean with that fierce black spade beard; and Dr. Fitzpatrick himself, old and stern, with a beard as fierce as Tom's, wearing a long frockcoat. The young Scotsman who had tramped from Tampico with forty-seven cents, who had ridden those thousand miles to the Atlantic, sleeping in Indian huts and depending for his life on the charity of a plate of beans and a cup of native coffee, turned into this rather awe-inspiring figure, a man who never wore a shirt more than twice and who rode about the streets of the tropical town, among the vultures and the mosquitoes, in the long dark broadcloth he would have worn in Edinburgh.

Of the old Dr. Fitzpatrick's Villahermosa—of St. Juan Bautista, as it was called then—very little remains: a few houses like the Hotel Tabasqueño,

which must once have been lovely; a little classical plaza in pink stone with broken columns; the back wall of a church (what was the nave is a heap of rubble used—but rarely—for road mending). Of the cathedral not even that much remains—Garrido saw to that—only an ugly cement playground marks the site, with a few grim iron swings too scorching hot to use.

I said to Dr. Fitzpatrick, small bitter exiled widower, caged in his Victorian *sala*, with the vultures routing on his roof, "But I suppose *some* good came out of the persecution. Schools. . . ."

He said the church schools were far better than those that existed now . . . there were even more of them, and the priests in Tabasco were good men. There was no excuse for the persecution in this state—except some obscure personal neurosis, for Garrido himself had been brought up as a Catholic: his parents were pious people. I asked about the priest in Chiapas who had fled. "Oh," he said, "he was just what we call a whisky priest." He had taken one of his sons to be baptized, but the priest was drunk and would insist on naming him Brigitta. He was little loss, poor man, a kind of Padre Rey; but who can judge what terror and hardship and isolation may have excused him in the eyes of God?

Tabascan Sunday

The anonymity of Sunday seems peculiarly unnatural in Mexico; a man going hunting in the marshes with his dog and his gun, a young people's fiesta, shops closing after noon—nothing else to divide

this day from all the other days, no bells to ring. I sat at the head of the stairs and had my shoes cleaned by a little blond bootblack—a thin tired child in tattered trousers like someone out of Dickens. Only his brown eyes were Mexican—not his transparent skin and his fine gold hair. I was afraid to ask his name, for it might have been Greene. I gave him twice what I usually gave (twenty centavos—say, threepence) and he returned me ten centavos change, going wearily down the stairs with his heavy box into the great heat of Sunday.

Garrido has fled to Costa Rica and yet nothing is done. "We die like dogs." There were no secret Masses in private houses such as are found in the neighbouring state, only a dreadful lethargy as the Catholics died slowly out—without Confession, without the Sacraments, the child unbaptized, and the dying man unshriven. I thought of Rilke's phrase, "An empty, horrible alley, an alley in a foreign town, in a town where nothing is forgiven."

There are, I suppose, geographical and racial excuses for the lethargy. Tabasco is a state of river and swamp and extreme heat; in northern Chiapas there is no choice between a mule and the rare plane for a traveller, and in Tabasco no choice between plane and boat. But a mule is a sociable form of transport—nights spent with strangers huddling together in the cold mountain air, talk over the beans and the embers; while in a boat you are isolated with the mosquitoes between the banana plantations.

And then there are no Indians in Tabasco, with their wild beliefs and their enormous if perverted veneration, to shame the Catholic into *some* action.

Too much foreign blood came into Tabasco when it was a prosperous country; the faith with the Grahams and Greenes goes back only a few generations. They haven't the stability of the old Spanish families in Chiapas.

Nothing in a tropical town can fill the place of a church for the most mundane use; a church is the one spot of coolness out of the vertical sun, a place to sit, a place where the senses can rest a little while from ugliness; it offers to the poor man what a rich man may get in a theatre—though not in Tabasco. Now in Villahermosa, in the blinding heat and the mosquito-noisy air, there is no escape at all for anyone. Garrido did his job well: he knew that the stones cry out, and he didn't leave any stones. There is a kind of cattle-tick you catch in Chiapas, which fastens its head in the flesh; you have to burn it out, otherwise the head remains embedded and festers. It is an ugly metaphor to use, but an exact one: in northern Chiapas the churches still stand, shuttered and ruined and empty, but they fester—the whole village festers away from the door; the plaza is the first to go.

So in Villahermosa there is nothing to do all the long Sundays that go on and on but sit in Victorian rocking-chairs, swinging back and forth waiting for the sunset and the mosquitoes. The hideous vultures group themselves on the roofs like pigeons: the tiny moron head, long neck, masked face, and dusty plumage peering this way and that attentively for a death. I counted twenty on one roof. They looked domesticated, as if they were going to lay an egg. And I suppose even a bird of prey does sometimes lay an egg.

Nothing to do but drink gassy fruit drinks (no miracle in the Godless state will turn this aerated water into wine) and watch the horrifying abundance of just life. You can't open a book without some tiny scrap of life scuttling across the page; the stalls are laden with great pulpy tasteless fruits, and when the lights come out, so do the beetles: the pavement by the green sour riverside is black with them. You kill them on your bedroom floor, and by morning, as I have said, they have been drained away by more life—the hordes of ants which come up between the tiles at the scent of death or sweetness. I bought some sugar one morning to take with me to Chiapas, and when I lay down in the afternoon an army of ants was trooping along three sides of my room.

The only place where you can find some symbol of your faith is in the cemetery up on a hill above the town—a great white classical portico and the legend “SILENCIO” in big black letters, the blind wall round the corner where Garrido shot his prisoners, and inside the enormous tombs of above-ground burial, glasshouses for flowers and portraits and images, crosses and weeping angels, the sense of a far better and cleaner city than that of the living at the bottom of the hill.

A Dentist's Life

I visited it with the dentist. He was feeling much better, though his family had at last caught him. “That woman—my wife” had arrived after dark with both children and moved in on him for the night. I don't know what they did about beds. He was

accosted just outside the hotel as we started out by a man who offered to sell him any drink he needed, not a bootlegger but a friend of a friend or a relation of a relation in the Government. All the Government offices are honeycombed with unreality: there is a picture of Cárdenas on every wall, but the man supposed to be administering his policy may be a Catholic . . . a conservative. . . . We had a cup of chocolate in the market, a great foaming cup beaten up from a little hard pastille—the only good drink obtainable in Tabasco—and went on up the hill towards the cemetery. At the street corners the dentist stopped to spit—his throat was always full of phlegm. Something—perhaps the heat—had destroyed memory. Every few minutes he would bring out the one fact he had caught hold of, “You going off by aeroplane, eh?”

“That’s right.”

“Where to? Frontera?”

“No. I told you. Salto—for Palenque.”

“You don’t want to go to Salto. You want to go to Zapata.”

“But I told you. I can’t get reliable guides there to Las Casas.”

“Las Casas? What you want to go there for?”

He would pause for what seemed hours at street corners, unable to remember, I really believe, where he was going, standing like a cow chewing. “So you’re going off by plane, eh?”

“Yes.”

“To Frontera.”

And the whole explanation would begin again. It was inexpressibly tiring.

I learned slowly a little of his life and of how he'd ended up here in Tabasco. He stood at a street corner chewing and spitting and mooning, hitching his belt, "Why, that house was a dentist's ten years ago."

He had been partner in a dentist's firm in the States when he was a young man and caught smallpox. Everyone avoided him after that because for months his face was peeling. People walked round him on pavements. He tried to enter his office, but his partner stood at the top of the stairs and waved him away. "'You'll ruin the practice.' I thought, aw hell—and went straight back home and packed a grip." Then he went to Atlanta, Georgia—no luck at all. Then New Orleans . . . Houston, Texas . . . San Antonio. His face had stopped peeling by that time. In San Antonio he met a Mexican who told him there was good business to be done across the border—with gold fillings. He went to Monterrey, Tampico, Mexico City—at last Tabasco. That was in the time of Porfirio Díaz. Then the revolution came—the peso lost value—and he could never get out.

"All the same," he said, "I'm going. There's going to be trouble, you see." Over the radio last night they had been told that the American people wanted to boycott Mexican goods. People were apt to get things into their heads about foreigners. We walked into the cemetery and out again. "Well," he said, "so you're going off by aeroplane?"

"Yes."

"To Frontera."

"No, no, to Salto—for Palenque."

"You don't want to go to Salto. You want to go to Zapata."

And then the whole explanation again while he chewed and looked around and the heat fell hopelessly across even the desire to remember. "Las Casas? What you want to go there for? There's going to be trouble. I wouldn't be out of reach of an aeroplane now—not for a hundred dollars."

I tried to distract him, pointing at some stone memorial in the street. "What's that?"

He mooned at it, chewing. "I guess it's to someone they shot." His mind for a while did succeed in running on a track, for at the restaurant door he said thoughtfully, "I believe in revolution. Gives people ambition. Puts money in circulation."

And he proved himself on occasions a man of resource. He would drink the olive oil at lunch out of a spoon—"Your stomach's the whole thing"—and once when he swallowed a fish-bone he vomited without a second's hesitation on to the floor. It was, in its way, an extraordinary feat. Skulking abstractedly round the corner of the hotel with his eyes open for his family, spitting at the street corners, suddenly lost to all the world with his chewing gum, humming in the plaza, "I don't like the food. I don't like the food," without a memory and without a hope in the immense heat, he loomed during those days as big as a symbol—I am not sure of what, unless the aboriginal calamity, "having no hope, and without God in the world."

Trollope in Mexico

No hope anywhere: I have never been in a country where you are more aware all the time of hate. Friendship there is skin deep—a protective gesture. That motion of greeting you see everywhere upon the street, the hands outstretched to press the other's arms, the semi-embrace—what is it but the motion of pinioning to keep the other man from his gun? There has always been hate, I suppose, in Mexico, but now it is the official teaching: it has superseded love in the school curriculum. Cynicism, a distrust of men's motives, is the accepted ideology. Look through the windows of the Workers' Syndicate in Villahermosa and there on the wall of the little lecture-room are pictures—of hate and cynicism: a crucified woman with a lecherous friar kissing her feet, a priest tipping with the wine of the Eucharist, another receiving money at the altar from a starving couple. They are admirably designed in great bold poster colours, and one's mind goes back to the picture teaching of the Augustinian friars. With them at any rate the lesson of punishment was followed by the lesson of love. But this hate—one cannot believe it will be succeeded by anything at all: it poisons the human wells; like rats we shrivel internally, suck water with a frantic thirst and swell and die. One saw the symbol of it everywhere, even in the little ragged military band marching around the town while some proclamation was read from the governor—they carried rifles as well as bugles and drums.

It was my last night in Villahermosa, the plane left

for Salto in the morning; I sat on a rocking-chair at the head of the stairs with the old proprietor, and we swung backward and forward, trying to stir a breeze. He was an old man with a pointed beard and an aristocratic Spanish face; he sat in his shirt-sleeves, wearing an old pair of braces and a belt, and swung and swung. He, too, like the dentist in Mexico City, looked back with nostalgia to the days of Porfirio Díaz. There had been a governor of Tabasco in those days who had ruled for thirty years and then died poor. Now they ruled for three or four years and retired to Mexico City rich. The election campaign was on—between Bartlett and a man whose name I have forgotten—but no one really cared; a few people had been shot in Zapata; but it would make no difference at all to Tabasco who won.

It was an awful night. The pavement outside the hotel was black with beetles. They lay on every stair up from the electric dynamo to the hotel; they detonated against the lamp and walls and fell with little plops like hailstones. Somewhere there was a storm, but the air in Villahermosa never cleared. I went to my bedroom and killed seven beetles; the corpses moved as rapidly as in life across the floor pushed by the swarms of ants. I lay in bed and read Trollope, with nostalgia. Every now and then I got out and killed another beetle (twelve altogether). I had with me only *Dr. Thorne* and the first volume of Cobbett's *Rural Rides* (my other books were in Mexico City). Cobbett I had finished already and *Dr. Thorne* I had to ration—not more than twenty pages a day, to include my siesta in the afternoon. Even at that it hadn't lasted me in Villahermosa, and it

was a cruel blow to discover that the binders had left out four pages—a whole fifth of a ration—at the climax. Somewhere in those four pages Mary Thorne's life changed from misery to happiness—I wasn't to know exactly how.

What books to take on a journey? It is an interesting—and important—problem. In West Africa once I had made the mistake of taking the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, with the idea that it would, as it were, match the mood. It matched all right, but what one really needs is contrast, and so I surrendered perhaps my only hope of ever reading *War and Peace* in favour of something overwhelmingly national. And one did want, I found, an *English* book in this hating and hateful country. I am not sure how the sentiment of *Dr. Thorne*—of Frank Gresham divided from Mary by his birth and by the necessity of marrying money if Greshambury were to be maintained, and of Mary's rich inheritance from her scoundrelly uncle after he had drunk himself to death—I am not sure how it would have gone down at home. I think there would have been mental reservations before one surrendered to the charm, but here—in this hot forgotten tropic town, among the ants and the beetles—the simplicity of the sentiment did literally fill the eyes with tears. It is a love story and there are few love stories in literature; love in fiction is usually—as Hemingway expresses it—what hangs up behind the bathroom door. *Dr. Thorne*, too, is the perfect “popular” novel—and when one is lonely one wants to claim kinship with all the simple friendly people turning the pages of their *Home Notes*. With what superb skill Trollope maintains a

kind of fictitious suspense. We know exactly from an early page that Frank will be faithful to Mary, that Sir Roger Scatcherd will die and leave her a fortune, that Lady Arabella will be humbled and old Dr. Thorne be able to resume his friendship with the squire, that Frank and Mary will live happy ever after; but we co-operate with the author in his management of the plot, we pretend to feel suspense, and that frank co-operation is a mark of the popular novel, for the great sentimental popular heart doesn't care for *real* suspense, to be in genuine doubt of the lovers' destiny. In *Barchester Towers* Trollope says in so many words that he will have no mysteries in his story—the widow, he tells you, will not marry Mr. Slope: the reader need have no fears. In this more “popular” story, he doesn't deny his creed; the suspense is patently unreal, but he allows us to *pretend* we fear, and sometimes it was a real strain—to stop after twenty pages and lie and sweat upon the iron bed and not to *know*.

But it was worse to have finished the book altogether, to have finished with proud delightful Mary Thorne and have nothing to fall back on but the hopeless dentist and the hotel proprietor swinging in his chair dreaming of Díaz. I had badly miscalculated in Mexico City—I thought I should be back in three weeks, and the three weeks were half gone already. How slowly while the beetles flocked in I spun out the last paragraph! “And now we have but one word left for the doctor. ‘If you don't come and dine with me,’ said the squire to him, when they found themselves both deserted, ‘mind, I shall come and dine with you.’ And on this principle they seem

to act. Dr. Thorne continues to extend his practice, to the great disgust of Dr. Fillgrave; and when Mary suggested to him that he should retire he almost boxed her ears. He knows the way, however, to Boxall Hill as well as ever he did, and is willing to acknowledge that the tea there is almost as good as it ever was at Greshambury."

So England faded out and Mexico remained. I had never in my life been so homesick, and the fault was Trollope's. His England was not the England I knew, and yet . . . I lay on my back and tried to project myself into home. Jules Romains once wrote a novel about just such a possibility; I built up the familiar in my mind carefully, chair by chair, book by book—the windows just there, and the buses going by, and the squeals of children on the Common. But it wasn't real: *this* was real—the high empty room and the tiled and swarming floor and the heat and the sour river smell.

CHAPTER SEVEN

INTO CHIAPAS

Salto de Agua

WHEN I got up, I threw away everything inessential—like used socks—and put on riding-boots and breeches; I wasn't to take them off very often in the next ten days. I was still uncertain whether I was bound for Palenque or not. I had set myself two jobs—to get to Villahermosa and to cross Chiapas;

Palenque was only a side issue, a blind for officials, and now suddenly I found it taking possession of my route—I was being driven there like a sheep through a gate. The manager of the aviation company had given me a letter of introduction to the storekeeper at Salto, asking him to supply me with a reliable guide—to Palenque. I was not an archæologist. I felt only the faintest curiosity about these ruins which the few people who had visited them claimed to be finer than Chichen Itzá. I was on my way home now by way of Las Casas—I didn't want to delay any longer, and my flying friends, with whom I had dined in mess the night before, had told me Palenque was two full days' ride from Salto. That meant five days in all. Well, one could only leave it to fate.

The airport was up on top of the hill beyond the cemetery. The great gateway, the black letters "SILENCIO", and the wall where the prisoners had been shot rolled by, and a few vultures lifted heavily.

A friend of mine, José Ortega, was flying the plane, a little cramped red six-seater. I sat up in front beside him and we took off ten minutes early. Far below Tabasco spread out, the Godless state, the landscape of a hunted man's terror and captivity—wood and water, without roads, and on the horizon the mountains of Chiapas like a prison wall. After a quarter of an hour we came down—no sign of a village—to a tiny clearing in a forest. A man sat on a horse and watched us taxi in, then trotted away down a narrow path and disappeared. Three people left the plane, a peasant woman with a basket and two men carrying leather satchels and umbrellas; they walked off—like season-ticket holders—into deep forest. We rose

again and the same landscape unrolled like a Chinese picture: an endless decorative repetition. This was the dry season: you could see the hollows—like thumb-marks—waiting for the rains. The mountains came nearer—heavy black bars one behind the other—and a silver horizontal gleam upon the ground was a waterfall. "You thought Villahermosa was hot," Ortega said. "You wait. And the mosquitoes . . ." Words failed him.

Salto lay right under the mountains on a bluff above a rapid green river which one must cross by dug-out canoe from the little rough landing field. The wooded mountains rose steeply at the back, shutting out ventilation. It was nine-thirty in the morning, and Chiapas, and no one spoke a word of English. A man carried my suitcase and my hammock ahead of me along the river bank, past the tin-roofed shacks where men lay in hammocks drearily swinging in the great heat, trying to construct a private current of air. Ortega's little red plane moved back across the merciless sky, like an insect on a mirror, towards Villahermosa. I had a sense of being marooned . . . even the dentist would have been welcome. The man carried my suitcase into a dark store with its back to a tiny dry plaza and laid it down; he said something I couldn't catch and disappeared. There were casks of—something, and Indians with curious pointed straw hats looked in and out again. I was overcome by an immense unreality: I couldn't even recognise my own legs in riding-boots. Why the hell was I here?

For the first time I was hopelessly at a loss because of my poverty of Spanish; always before there had

been *someone* who spoke English—except on the *Ruiz Cano*, and my needs there had been few and my destination self-evident. Now I felt a mistake might land me anywhere. And, of course, that letter of introduction seemed doomed to land me in Palenque. It took a long time in my bad Spanish to make the storekeeper understand that I didn't really care a damn about Palenque: I was much more eager to get to Las Casas—that “very Catholic” city—by the beginning of Holy Week. Could he find me a guide to Yajalon instead of to Palenque? He said he'd try, and every few hours during the day I visited him—to learn that he hadn't yet found a guide for anywhere at all. He *had* found me a lodging—a bed made out of packing-cases with a straw mat laid on the top in a room partitioned off with plywood from the rest of a one-room house. I was to pay two pesos fifty for room and food, and the food at lunch-time proved unexpectedly good. I don't really mean good, of course: one's standard in Mexico falls with brutal rapidity.

There was nothing to do all day but drink warm expensive beer in the only cantina. The beer was expensive because it had to come on muleback across the mountains. In the plaza there was no life at all: two wooden seats, a mineral-water stall, some dogs and flies—no church, of course. A horse tethered outside the schoolroom stamped and stamped, sometimes a mule team rattled across a little wooden bridge going towards the mountains, but long before midday the Indians had all cleared off and life went dead. There wasn't so much as a lottery seller here. At sunset I called desperately in at the store; no, he

hadn't been able to find a guide for Yajalon; maybe in two or three days . . . but I hadn't even *Dr. Thorne* to occupy me now. With a sense of doom I fell back on Palenque. . . . Well, yes, he could find me a guide *there*, and by the time I got back again he would without doubt have found the Yajalon guide. And at Palenque, he said to encourage me, there was a German-American with a fine *finca* and a beautiful daughter—*muy simpática*.

This German with his beautiful daughter had been a legend, a mirage which had been flashing on and off ever since Mexico City. I had heard rumours of them first in the lounge of the bright chromium Reforma, but in Villahermosa the flyers had told me that the girl didn't exist—nor her father. And as the storekeeper had never been to Palenque, I took the information with reserve. Perhaps once—years ago—there had been a German with a beautiful daughter. . . . Anyway, the mules and the guide were to call for me at five in the morning. How many days' journey? Only one day to the village, the storekeeper said, perhaps ten hours' riding, and rashly I left it at that—I was so eager to get on—although the flyers had told me it was a good two days' journey.

The dark came down punctually at six, and I sat outside my room on a hard chair, smoking to keep the flies away. My landlord sat on another chair, dumb with misery—he had toothache—and again inevitably with night the place took on the lineaments of home. This was what I knew well—a few hours were enough in so tiny and barren a place: the row of huts by the river, two parallel tracks running into the little plaza, the palms and the cantina

at the corner, and the wooden bridge over a small ravine and a track running off into the hills. One might have been here for years without knowing the appearance of the place any better. The fireflies moved like brilliant pocket torches, and a small boy stood by the track with a flaming brand making mysterious animal noises into the dark.

At eight o'clock I climbed under my mosquito-net and put my mackintosh cape under my head as a pillow. Oddly enough, sleep came at once—luxuriously. A hard bed has its compensations: I remember once in a third-class compartment between Toulouse and Paris dreaming with a rich sentiment and gentle sensuality of Miss Merle Oberon and waking on the hard narrow vibrating seat to find the grey sky over the grey stone, the Paris suburbs already going by. So now, on the packing-cases, I dreamed of a Mr. Wang, also known as Mr. Moon, who was to guide me—somewhere. He was dressed in the most extravagant robes—all silk and gold embroidery and dragons—and when I said I much preferred walking to riding, he immediately assumed that I was offering him my horse. He was complacent and difficult—another more seedy guide complained that Mr. Wang had “put one over him”—but nevertheless Mr. Wang left across the hard night an impression of enormous luxury, well-being, and romance. “It is long since I saw the Prince of Chang in my dreams.”

Then somebody rattled on my door, and something animal muttered and stamped and blew windily in the dark street. Mr. Wang evaporated with his silken robe into Chiapas air. I looked at my watch: it was

only four o'clock and I cried out a protest and turned over and sought Mr. Wang again in sleep. Somebody on the other side of the wooden partition groaned and muttered, and the animal stamped.

The Long Ride

I left my suitcase behind, and because it seemed absurd to think of rain I foolishly abandoned my cape and took only the net, a hammock, and a rucksack.

At a quarter past four I got up and dressed by the light of my electric torch, folded up the huge tent-like mosquito-net. Everybody in Salto was asleep but my guide—a dark, dapper young man of some education who had come from Las Casas by way of Yajalon—and his father, who had prepared us coffee and biscuits in his home. It was the cool and quiet beginning of one of the worst days I have ever spent. Only the first few hours of that ride were to provide any pleasure—riding out of Salto in the dark with one sleepy mongrel raising its muzzle at the clip-clop of the mules, the ferry across the river in the earliest light, the two mules swimming beside the canoe, with just their muzzles and their eyes above the water like a pair of alligator heads, and then the long banana plantations on the other bank, the fruit plucked as we rode tasting tart and delicious in the open air at dawn.

The trouble was, the way to Palenque lay across a bare exposed plateau, broken only occasionally by patches of forest and shade, and by nine in the morning the sun was blindingly up. By ten my cheap helmet

bought in Veracruz for a few pesos was just the damp hot cardboard it had pretended not to be. I had not ridden a horse for ten years; I had never ridden a mule before. Its trot, I imagine, is something like a camel's: its whole back heaves and strains. There is no rhythm you can catch by rising in the stirrups; you must just surrender yourself to the merciless uneven bump. The strain on the spine to the novice is appalling: the neck stiffens with it, the head aches as if it had been struck by sun. And all the time the nerves are worn by the stubbornness of the brute; the trot degenerates into a walk, the walk into an amble, unless you beat the mule continually. "*Mula. Mula. Mula. Echa, mula,*" the dreary lament goes on.

And all the time Palenque shifted like a mirage; my guide had never been there himself: all he could do on the wide plain was to keep a rough direction. Ten hours away the storekeeper had said, and after four hours I thought I could manage that quite easily, but when we stopped at an Indian's hut about eleven in the morning (six hours from Salto) and heard them talk as if it were now not quite half-way, my heart sank. A couple of wattle huts like those of West African natives, chickens and turkeys tumbling across the dusty floor, a pack of mongrels and a few cows listless in the heat under some thorny trees—it was better than nothing on that baked plateau, and I wished later we had stayed the night. They swung a string hammock up and I dismounted with immense difficulty. Six hours had stiffened me. They gave us tortillas—the fat, dry pancake with which you eat all food in the Mexican country—and an egg each in a tin mug, and coffee, delicious coffee. We

rested half an hour and then went on. Six hours more, I said, with what I hoped was cheerfulness to my guide, but he scouted the notion. Six hours—oh, no, perhaps eight. Those people didn't know a thing.

I can remember practically nothing of that ride now until its close; I remember being afraid of sun-stroke my head ached so—I would raise my hat for coolness, and then lower it from fear; I remember talking to my guide of the cantinas there would be in Palenque and how much beer and tequila we would drink. I remember the guide getting smaller and smaller in the distance and flogging at my mule ("*Mula. Mula. Echa, mula*") until I overtook him at a trot that wrenched the backbone. I remember that we passed a man with the mails travelling on a pony at a smart canter and he said he'd left Palenque in the night. And then somewhere on that immense rolling plain, in a spot where the grass grew long, the mule suddenly lay down under me. The guide was a long way off; I felt I could never get up on that mule again; I sat on the grass and tried to be sick and wanted to cry. The guide rode back and waited patiently for me to remount, but I didn't think it was possible—my body was too stiff. There was a small coppice of trees, some monkeys moved inquisitively, and the mule got on its feet again and began to eat.

Can't we stay the night somewhere, I said, in some hut, and go on to-morrow? But the guide said there wasn't a single hut between here and Palenque. It was two o'clock in the afternoon; we had been riding for nine hours, with half an hour's break; Palenque was, he said, about five hours away. Couldn't we

string our hammocks up to the trees and sleep here? But he had no hammock and besides, there was no food no drink, and lots of mosquitoes, perhaps a leopard. I think he meant a leopard—they call them tigers in Chiapas—and I remember how Victorian Dr. Fitzpatrick had met one on his ride across these mountains, standing across his path. It is rather terrifying to believe you cannot go on, and yet to have no choice. . . .

I got back into the saddle, thanking God for the big Mexican pommel which you can cling to with both hands when all else fails, and again the ride faded into obscurity—I didn't talk so much now about the cantina, I grumbled to myself in undertones that I *couldn't* make it, and I began to hate the dapperness of my guide, his rather caddish white riding-breeches—it was nothing to him, the ride; he rode just as he would sit in a chair. And then the mule lay down again; it lay down in the end four times before we saw, somewhere about five o'clock when the sun was low, a little smoke drifting over the ridge of the down. "Palenque," my guide said. I didn't believe him, and that was lucky, because it wasn't Palenque: only a prairie fire we had to ride around, the mules uneasy in the smoke. And then we came into a patch of forest and the ways divided; one way, the guide said—on I don't know whose authority, for he had never been here before—led to the German *finca*, the other to Palenque. Which were we to take? I chose Palenque: it was nearer and the lodging more certain, above all the drink. I didn't really believe in the German and his lovely daughter, and when after we'd been going a quarter of an hour

we just came out on the same path, I believed less than ever in them. As the sun sank, the flies emerged more numerous than ever; they didn't bother to attack me; great fat droning creatures, they sailed by and sank like dirigibles on to the mule's neck, grappled fast, and sucked until a little stream of blood flowed down. I tried to dislodge them with my stick, but they simply shifted their ground. The smell of blood and mule was sickening. One became at last a kind of automaton, a bundle of flesh and bone without a brain.

And then a little party of riders came out of a belt of forest in the last light and bore news—Palenque was only half an hour distant. The rest of the way was in darkness, the darkness of the forest and then the darkness of night as well. That was how we began and ended. The stars were up when we came out of the forest, and there at the head of a long park-like slope of grass was a poor abandoned cemetery, crosses rotting at an angle and lying in the long grass behind a broken wall, and at the foot of the slope lights moved obscurely up towards a collection of round mud-huts thatched with banana leaves as poor as anything I ever saw in West Africa. We rode through the huts and came into a long wide street of bigger huts—square ones these, raised a foot from the ground to avoid ants, some of them roofed with tin—and at the head of the street on a little hill a big plain ruined church.

My guide apparently had learned where we could get food, if not lodging—a woman's hut where the school teacher lived, and while food was prepared we staggered out on legs as stiff as stilts to find the drink

we had promised ourselves all the hot day. But Palenque wasn't Salto; the Salto cantina loomed in memory with the luxury of an American bar. In the store near the church they had three bottles of beer only—warm, gassy, unsatisfying stuff. And afterwards we drank a glass each of very new and raw tequila; it hardly touched our thirst. At the other end of the village was the only other store. We made our way there by the light of electric torches, to find they sold no beer at all: all we could get was mineral water coloured pink and flavoured with some sweet chemical. We had a bottle each and I took a bottle away with me to wash down my quinine. Otherwise we had to try and satisfy our thirst with coffee—endlessly; a good drink, but bad for the nerves. The school teacher was a plump complacent young half-caste with a patronising and clerical manner and a soft boneless hand: that was what the village had gained in place of a priest. His assistant was of a different type: alert, interested in his job for its own sake and not for the prestige it gave him, good with children, I feel sure. After we had eaten, he led us up the street to his own room, where we were to sleep. It was a small room in a tin-roofed hut beside the ruined church, which they used now as a school. He insisted that I should take his bed, my guide took my hammock, and our host tied up another for himself from the heavy beams.

I think the hut had once been a stable; now it seemed to be divided by thin partitions into three. In one division we slept, in another small children cried all night, and behind my head, in the third, I could hear the slow movements and the regular

coughing of cows. I slept very badly in my clothes—I had cramp in my feet and a little fever from the sun. Somewhere around midnight there was the sound of a horse outside and a fist beat on the big bolted barn door. Nobody moved until a voice called, "*Con amistad*" (with friendship), and then the stranger was let in. I put on my electric torch and he moved heavily round the little room tying up a hammock; then he took off his revolver holster and lay down, and again I tried to sleep. It seemed to me that a woman's voice was constantly urging me to turn my face to the wall because that way I lay closer to Tabasco, the Atlantic, and home. I felt sick, but I was too tired to go outside and vomit. The hammocks creaked and something fluttered in the roof and a child wailed. There was no ventilation at all.

Visiting the Ruins

Fate had got me somehow to Palenque, and so I thought I had better see the ruins, but it was stupid, after the long ride and the feverish night, to go next morning. And it was stupid, too, to start as late as seven, for it was nearly half-past nine before we reached them and the tropical sun was already high. It wasn't so much stiffness that bothered me now: it was the feel of fever, an overpowering nausea without the energy to vomit, a desire to lie down and never get up again, a continuous thirst. I had tried to get some mineral water to take with me, but our purchases had cleared the store right out, and all the time, if only I had known it, I was in one of the few places in Mexico where it

was safe to drink the water. Springs rose everywhere; as we climbed through the thick hot forest they sparkled between the trees, fell in tiny torrents, spread out, like a Devonshire stream, over the pebbles in a little clearing. But I didn't drink, merely watched with sick envy the mules take their fill, afraid that the streams might be polluted farther up by cattle, as if any cattle could live in this deep forest: we passed the bleached skeleton of something by the path. So one always starts a journey in a strange land—taking too many precautions, until one tires of the exertion and abandons care in the worst spot of all. How I hated my mule, drinking where I wanted to drink myself and, like the American dentist, chewing all the time, pausing every few feet up the mountainside to snatch grasses.

Nobody had properly opened up the way to Palenque; sometimes the guide had to cut the way with his machete, and at the end the path rose at a crazy angle—it couldn't have been less than sixty degrees. I hung on to the pommel and left it all to the mule and anyway didn't care. And then at last, two hours and a half from the village, the ruins appeared.

I haven't been to Chichen Itzá, but judging from photographs of the Yucatán remains they are immeasurably more impressive than those of Palenque, though, I suppose, if you like wild nature, the setting of Palenque is a finer one—on a great circular plateau half-way up the mountainside, with the jungle falling precipitously below into the plain and rising straight up behind; in the clearing itself there is nothing but a few Indian huts, scrub and stone and

great mounds of rubble crowned with low one-storey ruins of grey rock, so age-worn they have a lichenous shape and look more vegetable than mineral. And no shade anywhere until you've climbed the steep loose slopes and bent inside the dark cool little rooms like lavatories where a few stalactites have formed and on some of the stones are a few faint scratches which they call hieroglyphics. At first you notice only one of these temples or palaces where it stands in mid-clearing on its mound with no more importance than a ruined stone farm in the Oxford countryside, but then all round you, as you gaze, they open up, emerging obscurely from the jungle—three, four, five, six, I don't know how many gnarled relics. No work is in progress, and you can see them on the point of being swallowed again by the forest; they have looked out for a minute, old wrinkled faces, and will soon withdraw.

Well, I had told people I was here in Chiapas to visit the ruins and I had visited them; but there was no compulsion to see them, and I hadn't the strength to climb more than two of those slopes and peer into more than two of the cold snaky chambers. I thought I was going to faint; I sat down on a stone and looked down—at trees, and nothing but trees, going on and on out of sight. It seemed to me that this wasn't a country to live in at all with the heat and the desolation; it was a country to die in and leave only ruins behind. Last year Mexico City was shaken more than two hundred times by earthquake. . . . One was looking at the future as well as at the past.

I slid somehow down on to the ground and saw my guide set off with the Indian who guards the site

towards another palace; I couldn't follow. With what seemed awful labour I moved my legs back towards the Indian huts; a kind of stubbornness surged up through the fever—I wouldn't see the ruins, I wouldn't go back to Palenque, I'd simply lie down here and wait—for a miracle. The Indian hut had no walls; it was simply a twig shelter with a chicken or two scratching in the dust, and a hammock and a packing-case. I lay down on my back in the hammock and stared at the roof; outside, according to authorities, were the Templo de las Leyes, the Templo del Sol, the Templo de la Cruz de Palenque. I knew what they could do with their temples. . . . And farther off still England. It had no reality. You get accustomed in a few weeks to the idea of living or dying in the most bizarre surroundings. Man has a dreadful adaptability.

I suppose I dozed, for there were the Indian and the guide looking down at me. I could see the guide was troubled. He had a feeling of responsibility, and no Mexican cares for that. It's like a disused limb they have learned to do without. They said if I'd move into the other hut they would get me coffee. I felt that it was a trap: if they could make me move, they could make me get on that mule again and then would begin the two-and-a-half hour ride back to Palenque. An hour had lost meaning; it was like a cipher for some number too big to comprehend. Very unwillingly, very slowly, I shifted a dozen feet to another open hut and another hammock. A young Indian girl with big silver ear-rings and a happy sensual face began to make corn coffee—thin grey stuff like a temperance drink which does no harm. I

said to the guide, without much hope, "Why shouldn't we sleep here?" I knew his answer—mosquitoes; he was a man who liked his comforts. He brought up again that dream of a German with a beautiful daughter; I lay on my back, disbelieving. The *finca*, he said, was only a little way from Palenque. We'd go there to-night in the cool. I went on drinking corn coffee, bowl after bowl of it. I suppose it had some tonic effect, for I have a dim memory of suddenly thinking, "Oh, hell, if I'm going to collapse, I may as well collapse in the village where the damned guide won't worry me. . . ." I got on the mule and when once I was up it was as easy—almost—to sit there as in a hammock; I just held on to the pommel and let the mule do the rest. We slid down slowly over the tree-roots towards the plain. I was too exhausted to be frightened.

And when time did somehow come to an end, I fell off the mule and made straight for the schoolmaster's hammock and lay down. I wanted nothing except just not to move. The plump complacent schoolmaster sat on the steps and had a philosophical talk with a passing peasant—"The sun is the origin of life," a finger pointed upwards. I was too sick to think then of Rivera's school teachers in snowy-white blessing with raised episcopal fingers the little children with knowledge, knowledge like this. "That is true. Without the sun we should cease to exist." I lay and drank cup after cup of coffee; the school teachers had lunch, but I couldn't eat, just went on drinking coffee, and sweating it out again. Liquid had no time to be digested; it came through the pores long before it reached the stomach. I lay wet through

with sweat for four hours—it was very nearly like happiness. In the street outside nobody passed: it was too hot for life to go on. Only a vulture or two flopping by, and the whinny of a horse in a field.

Sight of Paradise

The *finca* did exist. When the sun was low I allowed myself to be persuaded back on to the mule, and there beyond a belt of trees it lay, only a quarter of an hour out of Palenque—over a rolling down and a stream with a broken bridge, among grazing cows, and as we waded through the river we could see the orange trees at the gate, a tulipan in blossom, and a man and woman sitting side by side in rocking-chairs on the veranda—as it might be the States, the woman knitting and the man reading his paper. It was like heaven.

There was no beautiful daughter, though I think there must once have been one, from a photograph I saw in the *sala* (she had married, I imagine, and gone away), but there was this middle-aged brother and sister with an unhurried and unsurprised kindness, a big earthenware jar of fresh water with a dipper beside it, a soft bed with sheets, and, most astonishing luxury of all, a little clear sandy stream to wash in with tiny fish like sardines pulling at the nipples. And there were six-weeks-old copies of the New York papers and of *Time*, and after supper we sat on the veranda in the dark and the tulipan dropped its blossoms and prepared to bloom again with the day. Only the bullet-hole in the porch showed the flaw in Paradise—that this was Mexico.

That and the cattle-ticks I found wedged firmly into my arms and thighs when I went to bed.

Next day I lay up at Herr R.'s—a bathe at six in the stream and another in the afternoon at five, and I should have felt fine if it hadn't been for the heat. My shirt was being washed and I had only a leather jacket lined with chamois to wear; the sweat poured down all day and made the leather smell, and the chamois came off on my skin. Like most Mexican things it was a bit fake. At the evening meal the lamp on the table made the heat almost unbearable; the sweat dripped into the food. And afterwards the beetles came scrambling up on to the porch. No, it wasn't after all quite Paradise, but it contained this invaluable lesson for a novice—not to take things too seriously, not to attend too carefully to other people's warnings. You couldn't *live* in a country in a state of preparedness for the worst—you drank the water and you went down to bathe in the little stream barefooted across the grass in spite of snakes. Happy the people who can learn the lesson: I could follow it for a couple of days and then it went, and caution returned—the expecting the worst of human nature as well as of snakes, the dreary hopeless failure of love.

Herr R. had left Germany as a boy. His father wanted to send him to a military college, and he had told his father, "If you do, I will run away." He had run away and with the help of a friendly burgo-master had got papers and reached America. After that he'd never gone back. He had come down to Mexico as agent for various firms, and now he was settled on his own *finca*. There had been revolutions

of course—he had lost crops and cattle to the soldiers and he had been fired on as he stood on his porch. But he took things with a dry cynical Lutheran humour; he had a standard of morality which nobody here paid even lip service to, and he fought them with their own weapons. When the agraristas demanded land he gave them it—a barren fifty acres he had not had the means to develop—and saved himself taxes. There had been, I suppose, that beautiful daughter (his wife was dead) and there were two sons at school now in Las Casas. He said of Las Casas, "It's a very moral town." I promised to take them out when I arrived: I should be in time for the great spring fair.

Walking in to the village to send his mail, we talked of the Church and Garrido. Though R. was a Lutheran, he had no ill to say of any priest he had known here in the old days. Palenque had not been able to support a permanent priest, and the priests who came to serve Mass on feast days stayed usually with R. at the *finca*. He had an honest Lutheran distaste for their dogmas which took him to queer lengths. There was one priest who was so sick and underfed that R. insisted he should not go to Mass before he had breakfasted. To ensure this, when his guest was asleep, he locked him in, but when he went to call him he found the priest had escaped to church through the window. One felt that the Mexican priesthood in that politely unobtrusive act had shown up rather well. Another priest, one who sometimes came to Palenque, was an old friend of Garrido. He had great skill in brickwork, and Garrido invited him under safe conduct to come into Tabasco and under-

take a building job. But friendship and safe conduct didn't save him—when the work was finished he was murdered, though possibly Garrido's followers had gone too far and the dictator may have had no hand in his friend's death.

Garrido's activities did not stop at the border. He sent his men over into Chiapas, and though in this state the churches still stand, great white shells like the skulls you find bleached beside the forest paths, he has left his mark in sacked interiors and ruined roofs. He organised an *auto-da-fé* in Palenque village, and R. was there to see. The evil work was not done by the villagers themselves. Garrido ordered every man with a horse in Tabascan Montecristo to ride over the fifty-six kilometres and superintend—on pain of a fine of twenty-five pesos. And a relative of Garrido came with his wife by private plane to see that people were doing as they were told. The statues were carried out of the church while the inhabitants watched, sheepishly, and saw their own children encouraged to chop up the images in return for little presents of candy.

Night on the Plain

It was six-thirty next day before we got properly started; the stiffness had been washed away in the shallow stream and my fever was gone, so we made far better time than when we rode from Salto. In less than five hours we reached the Indian huts where we had eaten on our way. After stopping for coffee, we pushed on three leagues more—distances in Chiapas are measured always in leagues, a league

being about three miles. This time we intended to make the journey in two stages. Just short of our destination a sudden blast of wind caught my helmet and the noise of crackling cardboard as I saved it scared the mule. It took fright and in the short furious gallop which followed I lost my only glasses. I mention this because strained eyes may have been one cause of my growing depression, the almost pathological hatred I began to feel for Mexico. Indeed, when I try to think back to those days, they lie under the entrancing light of chance encounters, small endurances, unfamiliarity, and I cannot remember why at the time they seemed so grim and hopeless.

The old Indian woman (you cannot measure the age of the poor in years; she may not have passed forty) had a burnt pinched face and dry hair like the shrivelled human head in the booth at San Antonio. She gave us bad corn coffee to drink and a plate of stringy chicken to eat with our fingers. I lay all afternoon and evening in my hammock slung under the palm-fibre veranda, swinging up and down to get a draught of air, staring at a yellow blossoming tree and the edge of the forest and the dull dry plain towards Salto, striking with a stick at the pigs and turkeys which came rooting in the dust under my legs. I dreaded the night. For one thing, I feared the mosquitoes here in the open, and though I had my net with me, I hadn't the moral courage to go against the opinion of the inhabitants, who said there were no mosquitoes at all. And for another, I feared, unreasonably, but with a deep superstitious dread, the movements of the animals in the dark: the lean

pigs with pointed tapir snouts, like the primeval ancestors of the English pig, the chickens, above all the turkeys—those hideous Dali heads, with the mauve surrealist flaps of skin they had to toss aside to uncover the beak or eyes. Suppose when night fell they chose to perch on the hammock? Where birds are concerned I lose my reason, I feel panic. The turkey cock blew out its tail, a dingy Victorian fan with the whalebone broken, and hissed with balked pride and hate, like an evil impotent old pasha. One wondered what parasites swarmed under the dusty layers of black feathers. Domestic animals seem to reflect the prosperity of their owners—only the gentleman farmer possesses the plump complacent good-to-live-with fowls and pigs; these burrowing ravenous tapirs and down-at-heel turkey cocks belonged to people living on the edge of subsistence.

And then a storm came cracking along the horizon through the heavy afternoon. It wandered in a circle, making the animals restless. They came in darts and rushes round the corner of the hut; the turkeys couldn't keep still; they scurried and hissed and raised their hideous and uneasy voices. I lay in the hammock and thought with longing of New York—Rockefeller Plaza rose in icicles of steel towards a cold sky; the ice-skaters moved in the small square under the stars; I thought of tea at the Waldorf, the little saucers of cinnamon sticks and cherries. This didn't seem to be the same world. I hit furiously at a pointed snout.

Punctually just before sunset the hens went to roost in the branches of a mimosa. The turkeys remained up later till dusk fell and then scrambled

with difficulty into the overcrowded tree. Two children lit a fire at the end of a path going off towards the forest and then beat the path with brands from the fire. Why? Perhaps to ward off the spirits of the dead, perhaps to close the way out of the jungle to prowling animals. The sparks illuminated the mimosa tree with its strange dark feathered fruit. Somewhere on the plain too a great fire was burning, clearing the land for crops, and the lightning came edging up across the sky—the night was all flame and darkness. A few big drops began to fall.

At two o'clock everyone was asleep but the pigs and me; they still moved restlessly round the hut. Then the sound of horses came beating up across the plain—this is the romantic attraction of the Mexican countryside, the armed stranger travelling at night who may be a friend or an enemy. The door of the hut was barred shut. A horse whistled, stirrup irons jangled; when the lightning flared I could see four horses, and a man dismounting. He felt his way across the veranda and knocked at the door—“*Con amistad.*” His belt drooped with the weight of his gun. He seemed to be the leader; the three others dismounted and unsaddled, and for a moment time reversed and on the lawn under the forbidding wall I dreamed of Stevensonian adventure.

The night became alive again; the turkeys lumbered down from the tree and hissed and squawked; candles were lit and coffee served. There was political and incomprehensible talk around the table—hammocks were slung. The owner of the hut seemed to have some objection to the stranger's gun.

He rolled up a trouser to show bullet scars in his leg. The stranger laughed, took off his belt, and tossed it into his hammock; the bearded arrogant faces shone in the candlelight. My guide slept on, and presently they too went to sleep. The leader had the table made up as a bed and—more sensible than I—draped a mosquito-net; the others wrapped themselves in serapes on the ground.

And then the storm broke overhead terrifyingly. The lightning struck the ground within a hundred yards; one tethered calf was thrown up by the light every thirty seconds or so, till I wearied of the sight of it. The night was bitterly cold and the rain poured in under the veranda, wetting my hammock. I put on my leather jacket, but I had no mackintosh; I retreated farther under the veranda, trying to avoid the men on the ground; the hens slept on in the mimosa. I was wet and frightened. I said "Hail Mary's" to myself and shivered with the cold. Why was I scared of this storm and not of the one in San Luis? I suppose the love of life which periodically deserts most men was returning: like sexual desire, it moves in cycles. At last the rain stopped and the lightning moved a little farther away. I got back into the wet hammock and dozed till four. I dreamed that I had returned from Mexico to Brighton for one day, and then had to sail again immediately for Veracruz. It was as if Mexico was something I couldn't shake off, like a state of mind.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A VILLAGE IN CHIAPAS

The Exile

AT four-thirty I roused my guide and he saddled the mules by the light of an electric torch. Our stirring woke the strangers and they too began to saddle. We started at five-ten; I felt tired and stiff, and soon we were overtaken by the others and rode awhile in company, but I couldn't keep the pace (a mule against a horse) and we dropped behind. It was a cold dreary day of thin rain and cloud. It seemed an age before we reached the banana plantations and then the river again, the unsaddling, the canoe across—the spool a little frayed unwound the other way. Just before nine we rode into Salto and I jolted into 'a trot for the sake of appearance. In this drab lifeless village one had the sense of returning home. I swore—in vain—that I would never ride a mule again, if I could possibly travel any other way.

Things change all the time, everywhere; people move and go away; even in remote familiar villages you are disappointed by change. Here, too: I might have been away a year, not four days. There had been a daughter's wedding at my lodging the night before; all the partitions had been pulled down, and the room I'd slept in no longer existed at all; there were stacks of empty "gaseosa" bottles instead. I changed and went to the cantina; I was determined

to have there the orgy I had dreamed about in Palenque. I drank two bottles of orangeade and felt very sick indeed. So I listened to the storekeeper's excuses with satisfaction. He had been unable to find a guide to take me to Yajalon, that village in the foothills which was the first stage to Las Casas: it was, apparently, the wrong time of year—all the coffee had come down from the hills and the mules returned. But by great good fortune an aeroplane was leaving that afternoon—it should have left yesterday; it had come from Villahermosa, but it had been unable to go farther because of the low clouds; it was doubtful too whether it would be able to leave to-day. When was it due to start? One o'clock. I looked at the ridge of mountain above Salto: the clouds were half-way down the slope, and the thin rain fell continuously. There seemed no hope.

I had an early lunch with my landlord, his daughter, and the bridegroom—a middle-aged unshaven man with bad teeth. My landlord wore an air of quiet dignity like a suit he had slipped on in my absence; lunch went decorously on with subdued gaiety. It was only eleven o'clock, and while the bride was searching for her groom's revolver I walked out to try to pass the time, down the street to the river bank. On the little landing-ground there was a tiny scarlet plane, and with anxiety I watched the pilot give the propeller a twist. I ran for a canoe, sent for my luggage, and hurriedly crossed the stream, and who should come to greet me on the other side but my friend Ortega? But there was change even here: his nose was stuck over with plaster, and his face bore

fresh scars. He had been trying out a plane in Villahermosa and the engine had failed. "It was a British plane," he said with gentle mockery.

There was one other passenger for Yajalon, Señor Gomez, the chief storekeeper there, to whom I had a letter of introduction from the aviation company. As the plane was due to leave at one o'clock, he, poor man, had not yet appeared. "We'll give him five minutes," Ortega said, "and then we'll start." You couldn't see the top of the mountain ridge for cloud; he said, "I don't know if we can get through, but we'll go up and take a look round." My suitcase arrived and we climbed into the little cramping plane—just room for four passengers. "If we can't get through," he said, "we'll have to come back here." The river dropped like a knife and was obscured immediately by thin cloud; a magnificent landscape opened up of rock and forest and sharp precipitous ridges; the low clouds broke at just the right points and let us through; an inky storm-cloud lay like a threat down a mountainside on our right. We climbed to about three thousand four hundred feet, and more mountains appeared above the propeller blade; we didn't fly over the mountains, we went between; long rocky slopes lifted to our level on either side; the world slanted up all round as if we were diving. "We're through," he shouted in my ear. We bumped downwards towards a white church on a little plateau completely surrounded by mountains; we were like a billiard ball dropping into a pocket. We landed very roughly, Ortega tugging at the joystick; when we came to a standstill, he said it had not been working properly—he thought he would have to take

the plane back to Villahermosa. I was glad he hadn't told me that before we started.

And now for the Norwegian lady. . . . A boy took my bag and led the way: a great square unused shuttered church, weeds growing out of the bell towers where the vultures perched; coffee laid out to dry all along the stone walks of the little plaza like yellow gravel; a little cobbled street between white bungalow houses, and the mountains terminating everything. The air after Salto even at noon seemed beautifully fresh: the village was two thousand feet up; I hadn't been so high since Orizaba. Through an open door in one of the little houses I came suddenly on a tall tragic woman with hollow handsome features and a strange twisted mouth—like an expression of agony—talking rapidly in Spanish. She broke off and stared at me. I asked rather stupidly if she could recommend a hotel.

Of course there was no hotel in Yajalon, but lodging could—sometimes—be got, she said, with a Señor Lopez. She sent her daughters with me—two thin little blonde girls of fourteen and eleven, startlingly beautiful in a land where you grow weary of black and oily hair and brown sentimental eyes. The elder one disliked me on sight—I was the stranger breaking their narrow familiar life with demands—for lodging, conversation, company. They could both speak Spanish and an Indian dialect—the Camacho, I think—and a few words of English. I got a room—a wooden plank bed in a storeroom, behind the counter a few packets of candles, some empty tins, a few straw sombreros. I was to pay two pesos a day, and that included food.

At tea-time I went up and called on Fru R. She had coffee ready and cake and we drank on and on under the porch of the patio where her coffee was drying. A separator hummed in a shed like a harvest engine in an English autumn. That was to become a daily routine for a week—I was to look forward to it from the moment I got up in the morning. Somehow I had to pass the days till five o'clock, and then all went well for two hours. It was a kindness impossible adequately to repay.

Poor lady, her position was tragic enough. Both she and her husband were Norwegian by birth, and they had both gone to the States to work. Her husband had bought a coffee farm in the mountains above Yajalon and they had prospered in a modest way—they had been happy, until first her eldest daughter had died and then her husband, and she had been robbed of all their savings by her *compadre* while her husband was dying. (A *compadre* meant a fellow god-parent, a spiritual relationship regarded in Mexico as a close one.) She was left with practically no money, two daughters, and two sons. She had sent the boys to the States to her mother, to be educated, and she hadn't seen them for four years and was unlikely to see them for many years more. She scraped enough money out of separating and drying coffee to keep them at high school, and one of them had gone on to an agricultural college and would soon have a job. Her dream was that one day he would have a good enough post to return and fetch them away from Mexico. Her daughters she taught herself—the small one was learning "The Charge of the Light Brigade"; she got the lessons by post from America,

and held periodic examinations in the little darkened parlour. And all the time the elder one was growing up; in a year, by Mexican standards, she would be marriageable; it is difficult to conceive the pain and anxiety of this mother.

She was a Lutheran like my host at Palenque, but she too had watched without sympathy the sacking of the church. Men had ridden in from outside just as at Palenque; the whole *auto-da-fé* had been arranged by the Government people at Tuxtla. They had burned the saints and statues. There had been one great golden angel . . . the villagers stood weeping while it burned. They were all Catholic here . . . except the schoolmaster, whom I would meet at my lodging. Like all the school teachers now, he was a politician. There had been a fiesta the night before at the school and he had made an impassioned speech on the oil expropriations (public affairs, which hadn't crossed the burning plateau to Palenque, had overtaken me now: I was not to hear the last of them). He had appealed to the people, "Get rid of the gringos," and, of course, sitting there in a back seat, she knew she was the only gringo in the village—except for a German who kept a little store and did photography.

I asked if here in Chiapas there was any hope of a change (I had found such a sense of hopelessness in Tabasco) and I learned from her for the first time of the rather wild dream that buoys up many people in Chiapas: the hope of a rising which will separate Chiapas, Tabasco, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo from the rest of Mexico and of an alliance with Catholic Guatemala. All plots against the Mexican Govern-

ment get somehow confused with this dream, so that she spoke as if Cedillo were behind it, and mentioned a Catholic general, Pineda, of whom I was to hear more in Las Casas. German arms, she said, were being brought in by night from Guatemala and deposited in the mountains by a German airman.

I went back in the dark to the hotel: there is no street lighting in a Mexican village, and the dark falls early and makes the nights very long. I saw my fellow-lodgers for the first time at supper, which we ate at a table under the veranda by the light of an oil-lamp—a stout, white-toothed mestizo school teacher with an air of monotonous cheeriness (and one obscene English word which he repeated, with huge amusement, day after day), his pregnant wife, and his small son of a year and a half who ran up and down the floor of the *sala* every morning, admonishing in his father's manner the child nurse who with them occupied one room off the *sala*. And there were others who dropped in for meals only—a few grizzled, friendly men, a young married couple with their baby, and a clerk I grew to loathe, a mestizo with curly sideburns and two yellow fangs at either end of his mouth. He had an awful hilarity and a neighing laugh which showed the empty gums. He wore a white tennis shirt open at the front and he scratched himself underneath it. I didn't know that first evening that I was to be stuck in the village for a week—an aeroplane for Las Casas was due in three days; I couldn't foresee how familiar these faces round the table were to become, so that I could go nowhere in the village without seeing one or other of

them—the mestizo looking up from his typewriter in the Presidencia and showing his fangs as I went by, a grizzled man waving a hand from a doorway, the schoolmaster's rich, powerful voice sounding all across the little plaza from his schoolroom, and the young married man pulling up his horse outside the cantina. It gave one the sensation of being under observation all the time.

There was nothing to do after supper, after the ceremonial gargle from the tin mug and the spit on the dirt floor, but watch the men play rummy or sit on a rocking-chair in the *sala* admiring their wives and their children. A little Indian boy from the mountains belonging to nobody at all squatted on the threshold, staring in with wide wonder at civilisation—the square stone-paved room with all the chairs arranged round the edge, and the walls hung with big family photographs and monstrous wedding favours and embroidered carnations in scarlet silk. Round the walls in order stood a packing-case, a sewing-machine, a wooden sofa, three hard chairs, two rocking-chairs, a table with a radio which didn't work, a gramophone, and two oil-lamps. Here and there hung velvet streamers of mauve, orange, and white; and at the door the little Indian face peered in with astonishment at the grandeur.

I went to bed and tried to pull out cattle-ticks, caught a flea, and lay by the light of a candle listening to rats rushing about overhead. I was overcome by a sense of disgust—Las Casas, that "moral" city, that "very Catholic" town, seemed like a promise of cleanness. Well, I told myself, only two days more of this and then the plane and a few hours' flight and I

am there—in time for Holy Week and the Spring Fair.

Alas, for Troy!

But in the morning, of course, the plane proved far less certain. Señor Gomez was not at the store—for hadn't we left him behind at Salto?—and his son, a dapper Chinese-looking youth, would promise nothing. The plane would "probably" come on Wednesday, but he wouldn't take money for the ticket: with Serrabia's company at Tuxtla you could never tell. Sometimes he was a week, a fortnight, late.

Nothing to do all day till evening came but drink pale ginger beer at the cantina—real beer was still as expensive as in Tabasco—and eat chocolate, Wong's chocolate, almost the only kind obtainable in Mexico, the home of chocolate, a pale insipid imitation of English and Swiss makes. Nothing to do but stare out at the low whitewashed houses under their mottled tiles and the clouds passing almost imperceptibly above the mountains. Canes were tied crosswise over closed doors (a religious symbol?), and over others black bags hung upside down (superstition?). The Indians with wispy hair on lip and chin and sad withdrawn faces came down from the mountains, across the little bridges, into Yajalon—naked to the waist, with pointed oriental hats of straw, bowed double under enormous crates supported by a leather belt across the forehead, plodding in with long pastoral staffs to squat by the side of roads, named absurdly even in this village Cinco de

Mayo and Madero, and eat bananas out of a satchel. The schoolmaster would sit down beside me in the *sala*, very large and cheery and Socialist and optimistic, and tell me how the Spaniards had oppressed the Indians, making them into "mere beasts of burden", and as he spoke the sad patient procession would plod by—men and women—just as it had for centuries. And afterwards, relieved of their loads, they would come peering inside the *sala* like dogs—cut off from intercourse, speaking no Spanish. The priests, who had learned the Indian dialects and acted as necessary interpreters between one village and another, who had shown interest in them as human beings, had been driven away. As for the school teacher, his large brown eyes were compassionate, he spoke with pity of their past, and knew no Indian dialect at all. In bad years they say hundreds starve to death, but no one knows—they retire like wounded animals into the mountains and forests, eating berries, lasting as long as they can, seeking no pity. And in the mountains, as I saw later, they have what the people of Yajalon do not possess—their crosses, their places of worship; Christianity existing like themselves wild and cut off and incomprehensible. After lunch the school teacher played the guitar, singing lustrous sentimental songs—"Have I a Rose in My Field", while the hot sun beat down on the outcasts. In the lavatory at the bottom of the patio some German had written up in careful loving script the lines about "*Wein, Weib, und Gesang*".

And then at last evening would come and cup after cup of coffee at Fru R.'s, and sad conversation

as the dusk fell. Somehow the conversation turned to worms—perhaps I had remarked on the swollen bellies of the Mexican children. Her own daughter, she said, once got so stout that her dress would hardly meet, and she purged her of twenty worms, some of them a foot and a half long. Her children, she went on, speaking casually of the inevitable sickness, were always stubborn: they seldom evacuated more than half a dozen worms at a time. It was like the grave, the earth taking over before its day. Then the school teacher and a friend of his dropped in and the conversation became cautious and unilluminating. Flames flapped on the mountainside when the darkness dropped—fields being burned for a corn crop. The school teacher began oddly to complain that parents no longer felt a proper responsibility for their children, staring out across the God-banished village.

That night it was very cold and the rats were quieter; in bed I wore a vest, wool pants and tropical trousers, and my leather jacket, yet I was still cold. I dreamed I visited an art exhibition to buy a present for my wife. I had marked in the catalogue "The Trojan Women", but it turned out to be, not a picture, but a surrealist object of black rubber, rather like a vacuum cleaner, which moved across the floor on wheels and said, "Alas, for Troy!"

Miss Bowen and the Rat

Next day there was still no news of the plane. It was expected. There was hope. Drinking ginger beer, buying chocolate, walking up and down the two parallel streets, lying on my bed reading Cobbett

somehow I got through the day—Cobbett on Tenterden, most English of market towns, "It consists of one street which is, in some places, more perhaps than two hundred feet wide. On one side of the street the houses have gardens before them, from twenty to seventy feet deep. The town is upon a hill; the afternoon was very fine, and just as I rose the hill and entered the street, the people had come out of church and were moving along towards their houses. It was a very fine sight. Shabbily dressed people do not go to church. I saw, in short, drawn out before me the dress and beauty of the town; and a great many very, very pretty girls I saw; and saw them, too, in their best attire." Out through the open door in the heavy sun I could see the Indians pass. I seemed to know everything. I might have been here a year. There was nothing in this country so beautiful as an English village, but then beauty is only an emotion in the observer, and perhaps to someone these forests and crags, these withdrawn and gentle Indians, abandoned churches, the mule teams ringing down the hillside might have given an effect of beauty. I felt something wrong in myself—tiredness and anxiety and homesickness can turn the heart to stone as easily as cruelty, sin, the violent act, the rejection of God.

That evening the Norwegian lady seemed more than ever haggard, wide-eyed, distrait, given to bursts of hysterical laughter. She had once, I learned, been in an American beauty parlour—the awful undreamable changes life makes in our destiny—and the queer shape of her mouth was due to food poisoning which had paralysed her here in Yajalon for

eight months. Looking in her shelves of books half ruined by the tropics, I found to my joy a copy of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel*—the only novel by Miss Bowen I had never read. Apparently Mr. R. had belonged to the American Book-of-the-Month Club. (I never thought I should bless the existence of such clubs.) So I took the book off with me and nearly trod on a rat in the dark street; it slipped from under my feet like a rabbit.

Sitting in the *sala* after supper, I saw another rat, small, black, and elongated, run up the wall like a lizard and in through the open door of my bedroom. There was nothing to be done about it. I went into my room and shut the door: better to have one certain rat than a whole family, for at night I could hear them chasing one another in the *sala*. I am scared of rats, and it was an awful and absurd night that I spent with a candle stuck in wax on my chair, and the brandy I had bought in Veracruz (poisonous stuff), reading Elizabeth Bowen and trying to keep my mind off the rat which moved discontentedly in the shadows. In the *sala* I could hear them jumping on and off the chairs. My second candle lasted till about two and then I lit another—but Elizabeth Bowen was better than candles and bad brandy. She was writing about a familiar and recognisable world, and it was her world, the withered spinsterish world of English people in an Italian hotel, which imposed its acid reality. The rat, the brandy, and the candle, the plank bed in the middle of Chiapas couldn't compete—the rat ceased to bother me; they weren't real, they were fantastic; who could believe in them? I fell asleep at last and found myself in a big Georgian

house surrounded by long and unkempt grass. A lady called Madame Talleoni was going to open a school, but how could she do so while her pet bird was loose and wildly angry—a dry twiggy animal like the anatomy of a turkey or a peacock, or a vulture? “You can’t blame it,” she said. “They sent it to me in a box without shoes.”

Mass Baptism

But next night wasn’t so good, with only *Kristin Lavransdatter* to fight the rats with. The aeroplane, of course, had not come. They said it would come next day; but as they wouldn’t take the fare, I feared the worst. The pedestrian tale of medieval Norway was not so real as Chiapas, though it reminded me a little of Mexico in its casual violence and hard indifferent life. I remembered the story the German had told me of his young sons: how they had gone into the forest near Palenque to kill a stag and one striking the body with his machete felt the axe slip into his brother’s leg. Somehow he got home upon his horse, and then came the long wait for the doctor from Montecristo who did not arrive till early morning as he had lost his way in the forest. That was the saga life.

At coffee Fru R. told me how a priest had come unobtrusively into Yajalon a month ago from the south. He stayed the night with Señor Lopez, who was a strong Catholic, and held a kind of mass baptism of several hundred children, including the mayor’s, at two pesos a head. Fru R., who acted as godmother to some of the children, was present and

she heard one woman turned away, because she was fifty centavos short, and told to find the rest. It is a depressing fact that persecution does not necessarily produce Father Pros. Any priests who remained in Chiapas were under no control; the Bishop had been banished; there was no court of appeal against a corrupt priest; and who can judge the temptation to such a priest, living in a Godless state, seeing the world and the flesh grossly triumphant among the swaggering do-nothing pistoleros of Tuxtla, to make what money he could while he could? At any moment he might be imprisoned, or banished to join his half-starved brother priests in Mexico City, with nothing to hope for but a good death.

Some time that day a mule team brought in the post with the President's message to the people. It was stuck up on the wall and the mestizo read it out—with great eloquence—to everybody. I was seldom to get away from the oil question after that. Luckily here I had arrived *before* the message; even a Mexican couldn't switch over quickly enough to regard me as the Enemy. For that experience I had to wait for Las Casas. But one had to admire the organisation that enabled the message to be printed, to reach Tabasco on the *Ruiz Cano*, which sailed the day after the expropriation decree, and to penetrate even to this derelict northern territory of Chiapas so promptly.

Unholy Birth

Next day, of course, no plane. I had arrived on Sunday and now it was Thursday. The telegram

from Tuxtla said the plane would arrive on Saturday. Next week was Holy Week and I had promised myself to spend that period in Catholic Las Casas, to see how it was observed in a city where the churches were open—so I was told—but the priests not allowed inside. On Friday the post was to leave, and if they had a spare mule it would be the cheapest way of getting to Las Casas, but it was unutterably slow: the journey would take four or five days at least. I went to young Gomez and asked him if he could find me a guide and mules to do the journey in three days. He said he'd try, and another long day dragged on—ginger beer at the cantina, the walk up to the edge of town, to the nearly dry barranca where the women did their washing, where the butcher's shop stood on piles and the vultures came flapping through the air (I counted twenty-five gathered in his yard).

There was one other gringo I found in town besides Fru R.—Herr W., a German, who kept a tiny photographic store. He spoke no English, and we got on as best we could with a little Spanish and French. God knows what had landed him in that village. He was probably agent for something, but I never learned what. The wooden wall of his tiny shack was covered with innocent pictures of naked girls and Plaisirs de Paris torn off the covers of magazines; among them, rigidly, the face of Hitler. Half a dozen books and cardboard boxes of rather bad photographs—that was the rest. Was it he who had written "*Wein, Weib, und Gesang*" in the *excusado* of Señor Lopez? He was a small neat man with a little fair moustache, aged about forty-five; I turned over yellowing picture after picture of Yajalon—weddings

and funerals and fiestas—the films too badly washed to last, and realised suddenly that I was expected to buy, at an exorbitant price. We agreed that England and Germany together could rule Europe; it didn't seem worth quarrelling in Yajalon about what sort of Europe that was likely to be.

Coffee at the Norwegian's; news from Gomez that there were no mules obtainable, but the aeroplane would almost certainly arrive on Saturday; rats at night: one day was just like another. Reading *Kristin Lavransdatter* by candlelight, reading the account of the primitive birth, I couldn't help thinking of how far worse the horror of birth must be here to Catholics. At least in medieval Norway there was the priest. But in Chiapas now you are robbed of the one blessing granted the parent in return for almost unbearable anxieties—the holiness of the child. You are not allowed to shelter innocence in your house. If you are lucky, the child may be baptized—if it lives—a few years later when a priest visits the village secretly; but that tardy baptism is not the same, after the world has taken its tarnishing account. The children have no bank of sanctity to draw on—the unstained Christian years—and we cannot tell what human nature may owe to that past fund of holiness. It is not inconceivable that the worst evil possible to natural man may be found years hence in Mexico.*

* Of course in the absence of a priest, anybody is allowed to baptize, but I doubt whether in this isolated and ignorant state such baptisms are ever practised.

Claustrophobia

Next day the rain woke me. The clouds were right down over the roofs: you couldn't see even the foot of the mountains; there was no hope of an aeroplane reaching Yajalon in weather like this. Hunched in the thin rain, the Indians came through—a curious automatic walk, Tibetan rags, creeping by like insects in single file with their long poles. I could hear Señor Lopez, the fanged mestizo, and the schoolmaster joking loudly. It is true what their admirers write of the Mexicans, that they are always cheerful whatever their circumstances; but there is something horribly immature in their cheeriness: no sense of human responsibility; it is all one with the pistol-shot violence.

One got an appalling claustrophobia in this small place wedged in among the mountains round its locked decaying church, and time just going by and the aeroplane always coming to-morrow. At coffee that night young Gomez brought the dreaded telegram from Serrabia, "Shall not come to-morrow. Will advise you later when I can pick up passengers." Not even the promise now of any future date. I felt desperate to get away. I implored young Gomez to find me mules and offered him an exorbitant sum if I could start next morning early. He sent me a message that night: all was arranged. The mules would be ready for me at six. I hardly slept at all—what with hope, and the rats noisier than they had ever been behind the counter in my room.

The Rain

And of course next morning the rain was pouring down, and six-forty-five came and no mules. As soon as the store opened I went to Gomez. He said the mules would come if it stopped raining, but it was impossible to travel in the mountains in this rain. And again, casually, he brought up the aeroplane. It might be here on Monday, and what a lot of time I should have wasted by not stopping for it. They said the same thing at Lopez's, with other arguments. The schoolmaster said I didn't realise how bad the road was; it was precipitous, dreadful; he would never go that way himself. He showed with his hands how narrow the paths were along the mountainside. It would take me four, five days, and the aeroplane would have come in long before that. I began to feel a little scared myself, to be resigned to wait. And then rather terrifyingly everything altered. Fru R.'s little blonde daughter stood in the dripping rain with a stranger, a small scrubby-bearded man. He would go with me in spite of the rain and for ten pesos less than Gomez's muleteer. He must go up to a *finca* and fetch the mules, but he would be back by midday. He vanished in cloud.

I couldn't help remembering then what people had told me about the roads, remembering too that the other muleteers wouldn't stir in this rain. How long did rain like this usually last? I asked everybody, and all gave the same answer—four days.

To pass the time I went with the schoolmaster to Herr W.'s to have a game of chess. He checkmated me in six moves. I was distracted by Herr W., who

stood just behind me telling me it was quite impossible, it was fantastic, to dream of travelling in this weather. The mountains would be impassable. But the guide, I said. He'd never been to Las Casas, Herr W. said. He knows the road only by hearsay. I began to hope that after all he would not return with the mules. Then young Gomez arrived. What was this he had heard, that I was starting without his muleteer? Well, I said, his man had not turned up and the other had said he would go, and now I had sent him for the mules and I could hardly change my mind after putting him to all that trouble. I went on explaining, longing for contradiction. But they wouldn't contradict; they would only go on filling me with misgivings. "He doesn't know the road," young Gomez said. "Wait for the plane, it will come on Monday or Tuesday; I am travelling in it to Las Casas too." And then the strange muleteer turned up, and there was no more to be said.

CHAPTER NINE

ACROSS THE MOUNTAINS TO LAS CASAS

"The Luck of the Road"

THERE was an awful sense of unreality about the start. Fru R. packed in my rucksack a bottle of drink—a kind of home-made advocaat, two sausage sandwiches, some candles, a little cheese, a serape, and a great lump, the size of a doll's head, of brown

sugar. I left behind with her, a poor return for all her kindness, my hammock and mosquito-net. It was pouring with rain. A few men stood in doorways smiling heartlessly. The rain dripped in under the collar of my mackintosh cape, and the mules stepped gloomily over the cobbles at a funeral pace. It was one o'clock in the afternoon—absurd hour in the tropics to start a journey. I couldn't believe we should reach Las Casas in three days; I couldn't really believe we should ever get away from Yajalon. I was weighed down by a sense of foolishness and impotence as we picked our way through the barranca at the edge of the village. In a few hours we should be returning—the gesture of defiance having been made—and I should wait for the aeroplane, reading *Kristin Lavransdatter* and listening to the rats.

There were three mules, one for each of us and one for my suitcase; sometimes the muleteer tried to drag the third mule, sometimes he drove it in front of him; for two hours we proceeded very slowly, step by step through the drenching rain while he lashed and dragged and lashed, calling out in a high hysterical voice, "*Mula. O Mula.*" Then quite suddenly we passed out of the rain (it continued in Yajalon for another two days), but progress was still very slow in water-logged clay; we climbed steeply up and down, with only twenty or thirty yards of level ground to trot on between each climb. I found my stirrups were far too short; it became a painful effort to keep my feet in them. At an ungainly harassed trot we passed through the only Mexican village we were to see till next noon and began seriously to climb, in long spirals, up into the mountains.

On a ridge about a thousand feet above Yajalon the mule with the suitcase ran away. The muleteer had dismounted to adjust the load, and the mule set quietly off at a smart trot down the mountain towards Yajalon about three and a half hours away. My guide lost his head: instead of pursuing on his own mule, he set off on foot, crying and praying hysterically to the Mother of God down the mountainside. Time passed; I saw the mule climbing briskly up the opposite slope, the size of a toy animal, and fifty yards behind it a toy man. Then they both disappeared altogether, and dusk began to fall. I was alone with the two mules—it seemed to be the end of *that* journey.

In the mountains the sun sets early—the horizon is high up the sky. I waited half an hour; the sun dropped out of sight, the forests became black below their gilded tips. The world was all steel and gold, like war. The opposite slope dropped into obscurity, untenanted. It seemed to me that I had better go back too, but I had no experience of driving a spare mule. I tried to drag it, but it dug in its heels and stuck and my mule went on; it was I who was being dragged—backwards out of the saddle, not the mule. Then I tried a little more successfully to drive it in front of me. When the path was sometimes so narrow between the rocky sides that I couldn't keep my feet in the stirrups but had to lift them up behind me, and when at the same time it descended, unevenly, at an angle of forty-five degrees, it wasn't easy to avoid a collision with the loose mule in front. It was easier climbing up the opposite side, and we began to progress slowly and steadily back

through the dusk towards Yajalon. We should arrive there, I calculated, if the mules didn't lose the way (I could never find it) before midnight.

But things weren't so bad as that. A quarter of an hour back on the path I found the muleteer with the mule restrapping the suitcase. There was a big bleeding gash in the mule's neck, so I suppose he had taken his revenge, promptly, violently, without sentiment. We had lost nearly an hour, but he still hoped to reach the *finca* of Santa Cruz—a Mexican farm—for the night, but in the dark, in a gloomy Teutonic forest of pines, we lost our way. We went on and on, climbing and descending, the mules slipping on tree-roots, until about seven we mounted to a little windy clearing where three or four mud-and-wattle huts stood black and silent in the moonless dark.

The whole scene—the round huts, a woman passing from one to another carrying fire, the black forest above and below—was African, and so was the courtesy of the old ragged man who came out to greet us. He couldn't give us food, there was no food—his hands were like last year's leaves—but he set a small boy boiling some black thick coffee, and when I asked him if there was a hammock in which I could sleep, he replied with gentle aristocratic courtesy, "Ah, for a hammock the señor must go to a town. Here he must expect only the luck of the road."

And the luck of the road was not so bad . . . the rats were there, of course, for the old man's hut was a storehouse for corn, but it contained what you seldom find in Mexico, the feel of human goodness. We passed my brandy bottle round and lit one of Fru R.'s candles—the only other light came from the embers

in the centre of the floor. The old man gave up his bed to me, a dais of earth covered with a straw mat set against the mound of corn where the rats were burrowing. It was bitterly cold, too cold even to take off my boots; the door was shut fast, the old man and the guide and the little boy curled up on the floor, and I lay on the hard earth bed almost happy. The fanged mestizo slipped away—reading out the President's message—all the blarney and the evil will of Mexican townsmen, the decaying church, the vultures, the rubble in Villahermosa, "we die like dogs"; all that was left was an old man on the edge of starvation living in a hut with the rats, welcoming the strangers without a word of payment, gossiping gently in the dark. I felt myself back with the population of heaven.

Arctic Night

If only Mexicans had been taller! The shortness of the stirrup leathers was torture. We started at six next morning, after a mug of coffee, and before we had been gone an hour my legs ached with the strain. It was after nine before we passed the *finca* where we had been supposed to sleep, but the guide insisted that all the same we must keep to schedule and arrive at Cancuk that night. He painted Cancuk in glowing colours, though he had never been there—there was a Presidencia, so it must be quite a large place where we could get beds, drink in a cantina. . . . It was like the promise of Palenque all over again—only much more inaccurate.

We got to a village for food about eleven—a few

little dry strips of bacon and tortillas—and my guide tried to lengthen my stirrups with a small scrap of leather he had found. It was no good; after an hour the torture began again. It killed completely what otherwise I might have taken pleasure in—the amazing beauty of nature. The scenery of northern Chiapas is very like that between Veracruz and Orizaba—huge gorges covered with forest, sometimes sheer grey walls of rock falling like a curtain for five hundred feet, trees grasping a foothold in the cracks and growing upwards parallel to the rock. We had to climb seven thousand feet before we reached Las Casas, but for every thousand feet we rose we dropped six hundred. The mules slid down, strained upwards; towards the end of the day we walked for an hour to rest them. After nine hours I began to feel that the words "*Mula. Mula. Echa, mula*" were graven on my brain for ever—that was all this lost magnificent forgotten countryside was to me—"*Mula. Mula. Echa, mula.*"

There were no more villages before Cancuk, only occasional Indian settlements, perched on rocky plateaux above the path, one with a little wattle watch-tower from which an Indian stared down at us as we climbed wearily upwards. After ten hours I began to protest—I didn't mind to a day or so, I said, when we reached Las Casas. Couldn't we stop for the night at one of these Indian villages? I always got the same reply: if we stop we cannot reach Las Casas to-morrow. But that wasn't, I think, the only reason. Indians made my guide uneasy; they were the unpredictable. Little men not much over five feet tall, dressed in long smocks with black mops of hair

roughly fringed over the forehead, they came stepping quickly down the rocks more sure-footed than mules, a machete swinging at the hip. Only one man in each village was said to know a little Spanish with which to communicate with the new race; it was forbidden to the others to speak with them. The guide couldn't put up in their presence that Mexican façade of *bonhomie*—the embrace, the spar, the joke—with which they hide from themselves the cruelty and treachery of their life.

And so he persisted that we must reach Cancuk, that fine town with its cantinas and its Presidencia, and at last pointing across a valley to the opposite mountainside he showed me the church: what seemed at that distance a great white cathedral flashed in the late sun out of the dark evergreen trees leagues away. After eleven hours I did begin to get a kind of second wind; it was growing cool, and as we mounted lazily through a pine forest and saw the sun set on our right hand and munched sweet bread out of our saddle-bags, I was touched by the faintest feeling of romance. Years ago, I couldn't doubt that, this would have seemed romance to me, to be riding slowly at evening through the mountains, going south towards I didn't know what in an unfamiliar land, the crack and pad of the slow mules' feet on stone and turf, and the immense serrated waste of almost uninhabited country, only an Indian watch-tower leagues away.

We must have risen nearly three thousand feet that day, and at six thousand night fell with bitter cold and wind. And I had lost my serape. It had fallen from my saddle early in the day without my noticing

it. But all would be well at Cancuk, the guide said; we could buy a new one in the stores. Stores! We suddenly came round a shoulder of rock on to the church itself. The fireflies moved about us, big and brilliant and close: I could see the light in the tail switched on and off like an electric torch—it was almost the only light in Cancuk. The great cathedral was, after all, nothing but a small square white-washed church, grass-grown and locked and unused, a poor and simple building with two small bell towers and oval plaques below them containing little wreaths, like the plates in Victorian keepsakes where you write the owner's name. And as for Cancuk, the eye could take it in at a glance. It was like a West African village with the tin-roofed verandaed Presidencia taking the place of the chief's hut, standing on the small plateau opposite the church, with the thatched mud huts drifting up and down the mountainside. A big bonfire flared a sort of rough welcome outside the cantina, an icy wind beat the flames; and the cantina was an unwall'd shelter filled with men; beds were raised on stakes from the ground and covered with serapes. A tall scarred man like a Moor stalked round the fire with a blanket over his head, and a woman knelt beside a pot making coffee. When we rode up the beds heaved on their piles and rows of eyes peered out of the darkness like a cave of cats: there wasn't an inch of space to spare in the windswept shelter.

We were out of luck. We had overtaken the mail, and there wasn't a bed to be got in Cancuk. There were two beds in the president's office and they were both occupied. We could choose between the floor

and a narrow bench behind the table. I chose the bench, but first I opened my bag and began to dress against the cold—a vest, two shirts, two pairs of pants, my leather jacket. I was cold even then. But supper tasted good with the heat of the fire on the face—beans and tortillas and admirable coffee, pieces of salt bacon and fried eggs (fried eggs were not easy to eat in the fingers, even with the help of a tortilla). This for the two of us—and corn for the mules—cost eighteenpence.

And then the hard bench wedged between wall and table in the big bare office. The men in the beds breathed heavily, and I slept in fits and starts. About eleven a fist beating on the barred door woke us all. I switched on my torch and saw the doubtful bearded faces lifted from the beds; somebody felt for his revolver holster, and then the password came, "*Con amistad.*" It was the mayor. He showed no surprise at finding four men sleeping in his office. A young brisk man in a wide-awake hat like a western sheriff's, he had been riding hard from Las Casas and had made the journey in twelve hours. A freezing wind blew in with him, and his horse whinnied in the dark.

A Grove of Crosses

I woke the guide at three in the morning; the mules had to be fed, and then I hoped to get away by four. Some people said Las Casas was eleven leagues away and some fourteen—thirty-three or forty-two miles; it doesn't sound very far when you think of cartroads and gentle English hills, but on

these rough tracks, climbing and descending, distances are nearly doubled. And we didn't leave at four, for the mules had completely disappeared. The muleteer went wailing through the darkness with my torch; I could see it flash across the bone-white church; he was praying and close to tears, as he had been that first day when the mule ran away. Poor man, he was highly wrought; he wasn't cut out for a muleteer. There was nothing to do but wait for daylight on the mayor's bench. The next time I got up, the stars were still out, but a great fire was blowing beside the eating hut, playing on the white-washed ghost of a church. A ghost, indeed, where no Masses had been said these ten years. The guide was still searching and at last in the grey early morning light he found the mules, at the bottom of the barranca, at the edge of Cancuk, three or four hundred feet down.

We had breakfast of coffee and fried plantains; the litter on the beds in the eating-hut stirred and became women again; Indians picked their way up the barranca and stood silently round the fire watching—little primeval figures of an older day. If Cancuk belonged to the Middle Ages, these belonged to the caves. Then we set out, winding round a huge hairpin bend along the edge of the barranca, the path terribly difficult for mules because it was cut in rock; their feet slipped painfully at every step. It took more than two hours to reach the end of that tremendous loop, and there was Cancuk still, just across the gulf. The scenery was magnificent: the great pine forests swept down to where we trudged at a mere six thousand feet, great rocky precipices showed like grey

castle walls through breaks in the pines. At one point, aiming at a *finca* which existed, I think, only in the muleteer's imagination, for we never found it, we took an appalling short cut up a foot-wide path at an angle of sixty degrees. It did no good—it only tired the mules—the *finca* wasn't there. After the first three hours the journey became, like all the others, just weariness—a struggle of wills between the guide and me, he determined to reach Las Casas if it took us all day and night, I eager to stop at a village he imprudently mentioned called Tenahape. Of course he won, by-passing Tenahape altogether, so that all I saw of it was a little air-washed toy spread out five hundred feet below our path. Just weariness shot through occasionally with flashes—not exactly of beauty, but of consciousness, consciousness of something simple and strange and uncomplicated, a way of life we have hopelessly lost but can never quite forget. There was a moment at a little brown pebbly river when the guide took a bowl from his saddle-bag and filled it with water from the stream and made himself a kind of gruel with a ball of corn—the mules drank and I stood on a stone and washed my face and hands and the shadow played on the stream, and it was like peace and natural happiness. And there was food at a little isolated Mexican farm, the floor strewn with sweet-smelling pine-needles—tortilla and beans and chicken and rice and coffee, the body's needs so easily quieted.

A kind of second wind came, too, with evening and the cool, when we came out of the forest on what seemed to be at last the top of the world nine thousand feet up—a great plateau of yellow grass,

across which flocks of sheep and goats came driving together from three-quarters of the globe, a few mud-huts, some men on mules cantering bareback by, an Indian herd in his pastoral tunic, a horn winding, and the last pale golden light welling across the plain, dropping down over the ridge which ended it as if over the world's edge, so that you thought of the light going on and on through quiet peaceful uninhabited space. It was like a scene from the past before the human race had bred its millions—England of the Conquest before the forests had been cut, a herd called Sweyn, the wattle huts, the world of Ivanhoe.

And there was an even older world beyond the ridge; the ground sloped up again to where a grove of tall black crosses stood at all angles like wind-blown trees against the blackened sky. This was the Indian religion—a dark, tormented, magic cult. The old ladies might swing back and forth in the rocking-chairs of Villahermosa, the Catholics might be dying out "like dogs", but here, in the mountainous strange world of Father Las Casas, Christianity went on its own frightening way. Magic, yes, but we are too apt to minimise the magic element in Christianity—the man raised from the dead, the devils cast out, the water turned into wine. The great crosses leaned there in their black and windy solitude, safe from the pistoleros and the politicians, and one thought of the spittle mixed with the clay to heal the blind man, the resurrection of the body, the religion of the earth.

The Hidden City

A league and a half to Las Casas, a muleteer had said an hour ago, and again an hour later a horseman overtook us in a forest with the same news—a league and a half. It was seven-thirty, and we had been on the road for nearly twelve hours. The hidden city never came nearer; one simply rode and rode into the gathering night. The horseman knew the proprietor of the Hotel Español in Las Casas and was anxious to lead us there himself, but it is a hard thing at the end of twelve hours to keep up with a horse on a trotting lurching mule. Suddenly we came out of the forest on to the mountain edge, and there below us were the lights of the town—the long lines of streets laid out electrically. It was extraordinarily dramatic to come on a city like this, eight thousand feet up, at the end of a mule track, a city of fourteen thousand inhabitants with a score of churches, after the hairpin bends round the mountainside, after the precipices and the foot-wide tracks, the climbs and the descents. It was like an adventure of Rider Haggard—coming so unexpectedly out of the forest above this city, once the capital of Chiapas and the home of Las Casas, a place with one rough road, impassable in the rains, running down to Tuxtla and the coast, and only a mule track for the traveller from the north.

I couldn't keep up with the horseman's pace any longer and he left us at a canter. The lights were deceptive; we had miles to go yet, edging round a semicircle of mountains before the track went down to the plateau: first a long Indian village with closed

doors and shuttered windows, then the white cupola of the church of Guadalupe perched on a hill at the edge of town, and then what seemed an endless cobbled street going interminably on under the clattering hoofs. We had had fourteen hours of riding before we rode into the little flowery patio of the hotel. A room with a bed and sheets, a beautifully cooked meal, steak and greens and sweet bread, a bottle of beer, and the radio playing: I was drunk and dazed with happiness. The neighbours sat round the radio listening to news of Spain, picking out the ravaged villages on a map hung on the wall, marking with enthusiasm Franco's advance. Somebody said, "Turn on the news from London," and "This is London," they said to me. It was still a Spanish voice speaking in Spanish, but it came from London. It welled out of that solid and complacent building in Portland Place, over the Queen's Hall and Oxford Circus, over the curve of the world, the Atlantic and the Gulf and the Tropic of Capricorn, over the cemetery with "SILENCIO" in black letters and the wall where Garrido shot his prisoners, over the swamps and rivers, the mountains and the forests, where the old man slept with the rats beside his corn and the flames beat against the front of the locked-up church. "This is London," they assured me again because I doubted it.

CHAPTER TEN

HOLY WEEK

First View of Las Casas

It was a lovely town to wake to in the early morning light, as the donkeys went plodding round laden with bright chemical gaseosas for the saloons—low single-storey houses with brown-tiled roofs and little flowery patios, the mountains crouched all round like large and friendly dogs; twenty-two churches, of which five were open, but no priest allowed inside.

The finest church is the old colonial church of Santo Domingo sharing a little green square with La Caridad and the prison—once the presbytery. A long flight of steps down into the square, barley-sugar pillars up the façade—the colour of pale terra-cotta—statues headless where the troops have reached them; inside, flowers and white drapery had been set for Easter, the church was scrupulously clean, a heavy curtain hung before the altar, and Christ lay dead among flowers. The walls were crammed with dark old eighteenth-century portraits of bishops and saints set in heavy and tortuous gilt. It gave an effect of fullness—and of emptiness, like a meeting when the leader has gone. Nothing meant anything any more; it was just sentiment to spread the flowers and drapery; the Host wasn't here. There was no more reason to remove the hat than in a ruin, than in the church on the hill above the city, smashed and shady with love-initialled walls and snaky chambers. Santo

Domingo, La Caridad, La Merced with a ruined cavalry barracks next door in what was once the presbytery, a broken square outside with a rotting bandstand in the middle of a rubbish dump—well, it was Easter, we were celebrating the death of God. This emptiness and desolation was right, in a way.

This was a city of craftsmen. Only one or two stores in the plaza contained manufactured goods. All up the mile-long street to Guadalupe were little stores selling identically the same things—pottery, guitars, serapes, candles, white linen, shirts, some of it brought in by the small mute Indians from the hills; the rest woven or plaited or beaten, as the case might be, in the little rooms which opened like money-changers' booths upon the street. Everywhere there were tailors—boys waving open irons in the street to keep the charcoal burning.

I went into a photographer's to buy some pictures. It was just a private house with the pictures kept in a cupboard; I sat on a hard drawing-room chair looking through them, while a middle-aged lady in a mantilla made polite conversation. A little image of Christ and something in the woman's manner of courtsey, gentleness, and resignation suggested that I was among friends. I told her I was a Catholic—it was like opening a strange door in a foreign town and finding an old friend inside. I asked her where I could hear Mass, and she sent her small girl out with me to show me a house where Mass would be said all through Holy Week: an anonymous house in a side street, a closed door, nothing to mark the presence of God. And at intervals all through the day the bells of Guadalupe rang out—the white soap-

bubble dome upon a rock perched high at the head of sixty-three steps, each separated by more than a yard of sloping cobbles, all the symbols of God's presence and nothing there at all—just flowers and drapery and cardboard angels starting from the wall with trumpets in their hands to blow a trump for nothing. It was sunset; the whole brown town lay flat below; night travelled off the immense hills; tiny bulbs, like fairy lights, came out all down the long street. In the plaza they were selling the Mexican papers four days old; it was bitterly cold when the dark fell, and gusts of icy wind circled round the plaza and the shut cathedral eight thousand odd feet in the air.

The Mass House

I got up at a quarter to six. The two little boys who did all the work of the hotel lay asleep in their clothes on benches by the door with only a serape to cover them. A mass of golden clouds lay over Guadalupe. From all directions women moved towards one point in the sleeping town with shawls over their heads. There was no real concealment. The police, I suppose, were bribed; though sometimes, I was told, when money was scarce, a Mass house would be raided, the congregation fined, the priest held for ransom in jail.

Mass was celebrated in a small room hung with white lace. Half the congregation was outside on a balcony a few feet above the small flowery patio. There were about a hundred and fifty people there, but this was only one of several Mass houses in Las

Casas. Most were women; there were a few small boys, a few youths, and a number of middle-aged men: a cripple wrapped up to the mouth in his serape leaned against the door.

The priest arrived in a motoring-coat and a tweed cap. His face was hideously disfigured with mauve patches and his eyes were shielded with amber-tinted glasses. Mass was said without the sanctus bell—silence was a relic of the worst penal days when discovery probably meant death; they were days which might at any time return at the whim of some police officer. . . . “I looked about and there was no helper: I fought, and there was none to aid”; “He was broken for our sins, the discipline of our peace was upon him”; the priest trod carefully between the kneeling women, bringing the Body of God out from the altar on to the balcony, handing Christ across the bowed heads. Afterwards the housewife stood at the door saying good-bye to her guests (there had been no collection: the cost of the Mass was shared among the leading Catholics in the town). You could detect a touch of pride, of condescension, because she had sheltered God in her house. One person at least would feel regret and disappointment if the Mass were ever celebrated again in the churches.

I went into Santo Domingo. An Indian and his woman came in to burn candles before the prostrate crucified Christ. They carried little bouquets of greenery—twigs and leaves from the lemon tree. First they kissed the feet of Christ, then they prayed aloud in a mournful duet, and afterwards the man lit candles and laid the greenery beside the body and touched the wooden thighs with it, to give the

lemon leaves virtue as medicine. Then they went gently out, small and black and bowed, and crossed the tiny plaza to La Caridad. They had prayed in Indian, not in Spanish, and I wondered what prayers they had said and what answers they could hope to get in *this* world of mountains, hunger and irresponsibility.

Politics

There were only two foreigners beside R.'s boys in Las Casas—a German bank manager and his wife. I called on them to learn a little of the background to the shut churches and Mass houses and the Indians praying in Santo Domingo. I thought I noticed in the plaza a great many pistoleros doing nothing all day between the closed and bolted cathedral and the balconied Government office: was it imagination that every morning there seemed to be more men in seedy sun helmets hanging about the Presidencia? There was an air of expectation . . . as if something suddenly was going to go off. Was it simply the effect of the petroleum dispute? England had sent a note to the Mexican Government; a black-board exhorted in chalk, "Mexicans! Prepare to give your patriotic mite for the reduction of the Petroleum Debt . . ."; but there was more than the petroleum dispute disturbing Las Casas. Red leaflets were passed from hand to hand and lay like large petals on the paving-stones. Addressed to the workers and peasants and signed by the leaders of the various syndicates, they warned the people that General Pineda was on his way to Las Casas. I re-

membered that Pineda was the Catholic General who, I had been told in Yajalon, was plotting a revolt from Mexico. That, of course, was rumour; as for the *facts*, they may have been what the German bank manager told me—you cannot tell: it is as if all words and the simplest acts of violence or love get distorted in the sound-box of the great barrancas.

Pineda was a Conservative rebel; he had held out against Carranza for years in the Chiapas mountains. He couldn't be conquered, though his force was gradually reduced to about four hundred men. Finally he obtained them a free pardon, paid them off, and retired himself across the border into Guatemala. He had never been a regular soldier: he was a brilliant amateur who knew the country he fought in. Later he was allowed to return and was granted the title of General of the Reserve. "He is just an honest man," Herr F. said, discounting the story of the plot, "who doesn't like to see people robbed." He had been elected President of Las Casas and under his administration it had been possible to get a few things done—irrigation, sanitary works—but a month or two ago the pistoleros had come from Tuxtla, had driven him from the Presidencia at the point of the gun, and installed in his place a friend of the governor of Chiapas. Pineda had gone to Mexico City and procured an *amparo* allowing him to reoccupy the Presidencia—with the help of Federal troops if necessary—and he had announced a fortnight ago to his friends that he was about to return. He was expected daily, and the pistoleros were waiting. Every time an aeroplane was sighted, people looked out for trouble. Perhaps he was saving

up a surprise for the Fair which started on Holy Saturday . . . perhaps he would arrive on Holy Thursday or Good Friday when the town was full of Indians from the hills . . . perhaps to-night as I had been told . . . Frau F. hated the people here; she and her husband never sat in the plaza these days, they avoided all gatherings in case something started. At any moment a drunken man might fire a gun, and the gringos were unpopular. They had been here twenty years, but they trusted no one. "Black people", Frau F. called the people; they hid themselves, were hypocrites, and all the time watched. Within a few hours of my attending Mass three people had told her that there was a gringo in town who was a Catholic. The trouble was, Chiapas was so poor. All the big estates in the south had been divided up by the agraristos and were falling back into desert. Only the farms in the north survived, because the tracks were bad. Chiapas was forgotten in Mexico City; it was so far away Mexicans didn't know that it existed. I had only to see the Spring Fair to know how far Chiapas was ruined. Ten years ago it was a great occasion—oh, the balls and the river parties and the fancy costumes—but now, I should see. She herself wouldn't go near it. You never knew—something might start.

"And the governor," I said, "who sent the pistoleros? He, I suppose, is a bad man?" You begin to talk in those terms in Mexico—he is good; he is bad—terms as simple as the pistol shot or the act of mercy. Oh, no, they said, he wasn't exactly bad. He was unfortunate. All the responsible people in Las Casas had voted for him. They had great expecta-

tions from his rule. But immediately after his election he had to spend three months in Mexico City on business. The result could have been—and probably was—foreseen. They were the important months when the taxes on the coffee crops came in. When the governor returned, the Treasury was bare, and no more revenue would come in for nine months. He had to govern without money, and that meant loans, compromises with all his opponents, with the racketeers who had robbed the state, and nothing was done at all. Now the very people who had elected him considered him the worst governor they had ever had.

That was Mexican politics. . . .

Well, the latest news of Pineda was that he would arrive at the Presidencia at six. I left the kindly Germans and went down to the plaza. Other people were waiting too; there were more revolvers about than ever. Every now and then people came on to the balcony of the Presidencia and looked down into the square with what might have been anxiety. A soldier sat on a chair beside the entrance holding a rifle, and a few Indians squatted along the sidewalk selling brown pots. There were more decrepit taxis than usual, and a car or two drove round and round. I sat on a seat, waiting, till seven. Of course he never came, that night or any other. All that happened was that the atmosphere of hostility thickened—and directed itself against me. A drunken group passed and repassed, throwing out gibes; they had revolvers under their waistcoats, so there was nothing to be done but sit, like a prudish maiden lady, pretending not to hear. I was suffering for the

ancient wrongdoing of the oil pioneers, the tiresome legal rectitude of the English Government. From that evening the hostility never lifted: I couldn't sit in the plaza for more than a few minutes without a gibe. It preyed on the nerves: it was like being the one unpopular boy at school. I was glad when young Gomez arrived by plane, somebody who didn't mind talking to a gringo, though preferably in private. Incidentally, if I had waited for his plane, I should have had to spend another four days at Yajalon. A strange state where it takes longer and costs less to fly than to travel on muleback.

Holy Thursday

Because it was a Thursday small boys were everywhere cleaning with knives between the cobbles, scraping up grasses. On Tuesdays and Thursdays it is the householders' responsibility to see that the streets are clean. You can be fined if a single piece of paper is found outside your house, and it is impossible to keep the sidewalks swept, for they are used by the Indians for meals, for cleaning their children. . . . There remains the problem of what to do with the rubbish when you do collect it. At one time a municipal garbage truck went round ringing a cowbell, but then the city council ran out of petrol and the service was discontinued.

I went to eight o'clock Mass in the same private house. The altar had been set up in the portico under the veranda; the setting was that of a Christmas crib: Christ in the stable. Roses in flower round the

well, the white arch of wall, sunlight and mountains looking in, and open sky. Indian families sat on their haunches among the flowers. The sanctus bell this time rang softly, and a tiny choir sang with reserve to the music of a harmonium. It was too important a feast for many precautions. The priest with the mauve face preached—sacrifice, sacrifice—and the Body of Christ was carried in procession round the well and the flower-beds—the dark Indians bowed among the roses—and up the veranda steps into the room where the Altar of Repose had been set up.

When I came out from Mass it was like an invasion. The Indians were pouring in from the mountains, down the long cobbled street from Guadalupe; they sat on the steps of the locked cathedral eating tortillas; they lined the sidewalks everywhere; they came in thousands to see the crucified Christ. In little straw hats with pointed crowns decorated with streamers of ribbon they plodded in, small and stocky and black-haired; their women had long pigtails and shapeless slum skirts; their faces were hideous and unshaped; but the men were often good-looking in a patient secret way. In Santo Domingo a great green silk hanging hid the empty sanctuary; the altar was covered in flowers and candles. A long train of Indians moved slowly up to the rail carrying little withered bunches, dry brown blossoms from the lemon tree. They handed their bouquets to a half-caste inside the rail, who laid them for a moment on the altar and then gave them back. Then they carried their leaves and blossoms away and stood in the porch of the south door with their backs to the aisle, facing the little plaza and the

white cupolaed monument to revolution and the sun climbing the sky, and prayed, crossing themselves in an elaborate mosaic, touching the eyes and nose and mouth and chin. One couple at the altar rail dusted their heads and hands and legs with the greenery they had seen laid on the altar. Mothers sat on the floor with their children under the dark Spanish oil-paintings, the massive gilt walls. Families greeted each other loudly in the aisle and stood laughing and talking with their backs to the altar, the day's magic task done, the medicine blessed, the prayers said. It was an odd mixture of fervour, superstition, holiday. There wasn't a Mexican to be seen: the churches were given up to the little people from the mountains. And outside small gay stalls were selling candles, fruit, drinks, cakes.

The Brother of Judas

In Guadalupe Christ was led in chains by two tiny soldiers, Indians kissed the rope which bound Him, and up on the roof between the bell towers under the white dome they were hanging Judas on the cross—a hideous figure in a straw sombrero with a paper face like one of the Ugly Wugglies from Miss Nesbit's *Enchanted Castle*, those creatures made of paper and old coats and umbrellas who spoke horribly in vowels because they had no roofs to their mouths. It sagged greyly from the cross, a figure of unholy despair, and beneath with gross and horrid jollity sat a stout stuffed figure, in white trousers and a pink shirt, with a scarlet face; the straw legs dangled from the ledge under the cross and swayed a little in the breeze.

"Who was he?" I asked. Oh, he, they said, was the brother of Judas. They made an awful family party, there on the church top in their gloom and their gaiety, while the youths on the roof beat a tin tray and rattled wooden clappers, to tell the town that Judas and his jolly brother were properly hanged.

242 *Sissies*

Day by day it became more unpleasant to show myself on the street. I had nothing to do and nothing to read: I was driven to write an article on Tabasco for *The Tablet*, sitting in the patio of the Hotel Español. Young Gomez's presence proved a mixed blessing; true, it was good to find my ostracism broken, but he insisted on speaking English, of which he knew even less than I knew Spanish, and he would answer "Yes" to all questions he didn't understand—much as I did in Spanish. Yes, Pineda was here. Yes, Pineda was coming to-day, to-morrow. . . . Yes.

Beggars were a greater comfort, for to them, too, one was not a gringo; the blind and halt felt their way every morning into the patio. They had hope and self-respect—they gave something in return for what they got; a prayer in which they believed and in which the donor believed. They had a place in the world, unlike the poor bitter men playing gramophones in London gutters. Every morning the Mother Superior arrived with a basket collecting alms for the hospital. She wore ordinary clothes, of course, and the hospital was called the municipal hospital now—but the nurses were still nuns, and they had still to depend on charity.

I managed to borrow some American women's magazines from Frau F. and sat for hours at a time in the patio reading them. It seemed a silly thing to come all this way for that; the awful journey in the *Ruiz Cano*, the weary hours on muleback—to read General Hugh Johnson on Roosevelt and examples of American research. "This is the conclusion resulting from a study of 242 boys known to their playmates and school companions as sissies. To secure a composite picture of these youngsters, to learn what qualities they had in common, what it is that stamps a boy as a sissy, a series of questions were put to their brothers, sisters, schoolmasters, teachers, and other older persons who knew them well. The answers, tabulated and charted, are revealing."

Then, when I could bear it no longer, I'd carry the statistics of sissyness in my brain into Santo Domingo or up the long Guadalupe street, stopping for a glass of quince wine or a gaseosa, always moving on to avoid the direct insult to which there was no reply.

Back again to read a "Diary of Domesticity" by Gladys Taylor. "Curiously enough, this reminds me of an epitaph I read in a book once, years ago. 'They were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in death they were not divided.' That's a better epitaph than Colonel Byrd's in Westover, Virginia, composed by himself and carved on a stone column testifying to a thousand achievements and virtues. Sometimes, in a dark hour, the shortness of life comes into my mind. I wonder about immortality."

In a book once, years ago . . .

Good Friday

It was Good Friday. All day you could see women hurrying with ostrich secrecy towards the house in the side street where the Body of Christ was reserved in the little room off the balcony. In Santo Domingo the crucified figure was the centre of a noisy public meeting. Indians shouted and pushed and held animated conversations; babies on their mothers' backs munched tortillas; and in the centre where the soapbox orator should have stood lay the great crucifix. The men brought up more greenery and brushed the wooden loincloth and the thighs with it. What was in those secret minds, with which only priests have ever made real contact? Was it a formal superstition, like not walking under a ladder and throwing salt over the shoulder? Or was there a darker and more passionate idolatry? Now that the Body of God could not be found in any church in Chiapas, was the wooden image taking on a terrible and erroneous importance?

Herr F. told me a story of the reopening of the churches in central and southern Chiapas. It happened about six months ago and started in a village called Sinajon. The people had gathered together to kill the tax collector; he was warned and stayed away, and the villagers waited in vain with a dreadful sense of anti-climax. "We must do something," they said. "Let us open our church." So they fetched their womenfolk and broke open the doors. The news spread so quickly that next day churches were broken open a hundred miles away. In Las Casas the Government put a soldier at every door, but the soldiers

acted with great prudence and allowed themselves to be pushed aside without firing a shot. The churches which are open now in Las Casas show the popular choice: Santo Domingo, the most venerated of all; La Caridad, La Merced, Guadalupe, and a little obscure church along the road to Tuxtla with no interest to anyone but the parishioners. I arrived when it was being decorated ready for Holy Thursday. There were few women about; it was being arrayed and guarded by hostile men who watched my movements with suspicion.

And what, I asked a number of people, would happen if next Easter the priests acted with the same suddenness and confidence as the laity—simply walked into Santo Domingo and began to say Mass? Would the Government give way again? Who knows? they said. Perhaps—or perhaps they'd shoot. In Villahermosa one month after my visit the peasants—there were no priests—did act. They had no churches to open, but they set up a rough altar against the back wall of the one ruined church and prayed amongst the rubble. The soldiers came and opened fire and a few were killed—men, women, and children. But then Tabasco has a sterner, more disciplined tradition than Chiapas. I could not help feeling that for a bold priest a great chance was waiting one Holy Thursday when the town was full of Indians.

On Good Friday afternoon the Indians began to evacuate Las Casas. An old Indian sat dead drunk on the pavement near Guadalupe and wouldn't move; with sad dignity he waved his companions away, but they persisted, urging him off to the mountains,

taking his load themselves, helping him to his feet, whispering gently, secretly. . . . In Santo Domingo a service was held—for Mexicans this time; the Indians had had their hour. The sacristan led the prayers—there was uncertain singing and a wavering organ.

In the plaza the same insolent stares and veiled gibes. I went back to the patio and read the women's magazines. There was an advertisement for a Reference Library for Sub-Debs. "A date to remember. How to put yourself across so boys will never forget you." Three cents. "Tables for Ladies. How do you rate with boys? Here's a talent test for you." Three cents. "Rating for Dating. The famous sub-deb chart for getting along with boys." Three cents.

I loathed Mexico—but there were times when it seemed as if there were worse places. "In a book once . . ." Here were idolatry and oppression, starvation and casual violence, but you lived under the shadow of religion—of God or the Devil. "Rating for Dating"—it wasn't evil, it wasn't anything at all, it was just the drugstore and the Coca-Cola, the hamburger, the sinless empty graceless chromium world.

San Miguelito

Herr F. led me over the rocks at the edge of town to show me examples of Mexican engineering. First the reservoir, half finished, standing there to crack into ruin in the winter because there was no more money: all money was diverted to Tampico and the oilfields.

The river, a small trickle of water, disappeared into a crack of the mountains; it reappeared again on the other side twenty kilometres away. But in the rains it became a torrent; a fallen tree trunk, a loose bush could block its escape, and seven years ago there had been a disastrous flood. Herr F. had been in charge of the relief operations; he showed me the overgrown neglected canal he had dug at a cost of only two hundred and fifty dollars. Then Cárdenas visited Las Casas; he was not yet President, he was on his electoral tour, and he had promised, if he were elected, men and money. He kept his promise: money poured into Las Casas. Federal engineers began the work all over again, building elaborate showy works. We looked at them: the walls were made of loose rocks stuck in cracking cement; in the next rains the walls themselves would help to block the channel. Then as contrast he showed me what the Spaniards had built eighty years before. The fine masonry of General Utrillo stood intact; only the alteration in the level of the land made his works out of date. A little way above Herr F.'s canal a house and shed stood on the waste. "That shed," he said, "was a chapel until the Government engineers arrived." Herr F. was not a Catholic, he was a Lutheran, but he spoke with bitterness. The church had been put up by the owners of the house when the father of the family recovered from a sickness. Situated just at that place where the river disappeared into its subterranean bed, at the danger point for Las Casas, the chapel became a place of popular pilgrimage. When the rains came, men, women, and children would go on their knees—some of them

carrying the cross—to the river. It must have been a journey of terrible pain—thorn bushes and rocks and steep descents: it was difficult enough for us to keep from falling. When they reached the river they poured water on the cross and carried it back. Herr F. in his operations had been very careful of the church, but the Federal engineers threw out the cross and converted the chapel into a shed for their tools.

"Of course," he said, "they were afraid of it. The Government, I mean."

It must have set light to a train of thought, as we scrambled over the rocks and looked down into the dry ten-foot barranca where they used to come on their knees, under the cross.

"The Government is very uneasy about San Miguelito," he suddenly remarked. The mountains of Chiapas stuck sharply up all round the city, perched there on its eight-thousand-foot plateau, parched and chilled alternately each day and night. The twenty-four churches rose like captive balloons above the one-storey houses, the mule tracks descended from the north and the single road ran south—to Tuxtla and the Government offices and the lounging pistoleros. It seemed odd that men like that should be troubled about a saint.

"San Miguelito?" I said.

He was astonished that I hadn't heard of San Miguelito. The news had spread as far as Tabasco, a hundred miles away. He had owned a coffee *finca* himself on the borders of Tabasco and Chiapas, and the Indians had daily passed his gate, going to visit San Miguelito. Why, it was causing a religious

revival; the Government was so troubled it had sent soldiers to seize the saint, but they hadn't captured him.

"What does he do?" I said.

"He recommends medicines—some of them Indian medicines and some the latest patent medicines from Mexico City."

"Is he a statue?"

"I don't know. I can't make it out—he's very small. Sometimes it sounds as if he's just a picture post card. Of course they wouldn't let *me* see him."

The story was this: a poor Mexican farmer had for years kept San Miguelito (whatever he was) in a box. One day, about eighteen months ago, he had opened the box and San Miguelito had spoken to him in a high clear voice. He was so scared he ran all the way into the village of Bochil with the box, and there he had found four friends of his gathered together in a room. He had laid the box on the table and told them his story. Of course they didn't believe him; then one of them opened the box and the thin high voice came out of it. Soon after his astonishing discovery the farmer had died, and now San Miguelito was kept by his wife and his son in the small village of Sanoyo.

This German, as I have said, was a Protestant; he couldn't make head or tail of the thing; he really half believed the story—he knew one of the four men who was in that room when the farmer arrived with his box; he had listened to the pilgrims' tales. It couldn't be self-hypnotism—some of the patent medicines were ones no Indian could have heard of in the Chiapas wilds. There were no wires;

apparently you could handle the box while San Miguelito talked. He had the reputation of speaking in German, French, and English, as well as in Spanish and the Indian tongues. A lawyer from Las Casas had visited him and was convinced—but then the lawyer drank. What was one to believe, if one was an engineer, a bank manager, and a Protestant?

We came back into Las Casas and stopped at a cantina for drinks. I couldn't keep my mind off the miracle. I was ready to go to any expense . . . how could one go on living later with the thought that fifty pesos had stood between oneself and, well, revelation of some kind, divine or devilish, if the voice spoke? Then came the blow. The man in the cantina said San Miguelito was no longer in Sanoyo: a doctor had been sent from Tuxtla who put the whole thing down to auto-suggestion and the saint had been removed to a museum in Mexico City. But you can never get anything straight in Mexico; in the hotel the owner, who was a pious Catholic, told me the saint was still in Sanoyo, and I went out and hired a car.

Feria de Primavera

That afternoon the Fair was due to start—at four o'clock in the afternoon, if the florid programmes of the week's festivities were to be believed; but at four there was no sign of a fair except one shooting-booth and a children's merry-go-round in the plaza. "At four of the afternoon magnificent allegorical cars preceded by bands of musicians, of enthusiastic students, of athletes, of the workers' syndicates will

tour the principal streets and avenues of the city to announce the opening of the festival. At night in El Teatro Zebadua the election of the *Señorita Las Casas* 1938 will be declared and a special programme will be given." Glancing down the programme one noticed in big type "SELECTA FUNCION CINEMATOGRAFICA", a gathering of marimba players, a "sensational encounter at basket-ball", a few dances, a tennis tournament (*dobles y mixto*), a boxing match. Certainly the great historic Spring Fair of Las Casas had fallen on evil times; in the first programmes they had announced a bull-fight, but they hadn't raised enough money to attract fighters to this abandoned town.

It was nearly six; people were waiting about in the plaza for Pineda, who didn't come; a few children were shooting in the booth; no other sign of a fair. Then a rocket went off and the procession came into sight—a dingy saloon car with half a dozen young men—students, athletes, workers?—an allegorical car representing spring, and a small open car carrying a big cardboard kodak carton. Somebody blew a bugle and the rockets went up and the three little motors kept on their sombre, sedate, and cheerless round. The Fair had started.

One of the young sons of Herr R. from Palenque came to supper with me; his elder brother, he said, had a headache, he regretted . . . but I guessed what that meant. They had had to avoid me already in public. I was a pariah; it wasn't good to be seen about with me. They had probably tossed up to choose the victim, and I felt enormous sympathy for the small fair fifteen-year-old loser. He said the

atmosphere at their college was awful: people were polite to your face, but behind your back you became just gringos. A few days ago he and his brother were sent a dollar from America. They were trying to change it at the bank when a man came in. "He said to the clerk, 'I shouldn't take a dirty bit of paper like that, all over germs.' And the clerk, he wouldn't give us the proper exchange."

The drop in the exchange, of course, has increased the hate—as if they believed the difference represented money stolen from them by gringos.

The programme at the cinema was supposed to start at nine, but for half an hour longer than that we were exposed to the unfriendly stare of students in the side boxes. I pitied young R. from the bottom of my heart, but how could I tell him so without casting a reflection on his courtesy and courage? He would suffer for this later—to have been seen in the company of a gringo whose presence in town was known to everyone and suspected by most. At last the Queen climbed on to the stage with her maids and courtiers, buxom and brown-eyed and gold-toothed. The girls sat on hard straight chairs in front of an absurd Edwardian drawing-room set of cardboard tables and cut-out ferns, and beside each chair stood a man self-conscious and subfusc. A poet read an ode into the microphone, the brothers Something-or-Other played interminably on the marimba, and somebody made an oration on the petroleum situation. Even foreigners, he said, should contribute to the debt in return for Mexico's hospitality—but where was the hospitality? I wondered, meeting the dark hostile gaze of the students

along the wall. Then there was another speech and more marimba playing and a raffle for free cinema seats which went on for half an hour, and at last the great film, specially brought to Las Casas for the Spring Fair: Warner Baxter and Alice Faye in a faded backstage musical. Incomprehensible situations passed across a flickery screen, the lights of Broadway, complicated renunciations. They became more fantastic than ever translated into Spanish. The audience sat in silence; they never laughed once. Only the Queen of the Fair sometimes smiled, chin on gloved hand, sophisticated and gold-toothed, in mauve. Alice Faye's fair and unformed face was projected in enormous detail weeping enormous tears; her man had failed, taken to drink, while she was featured over Broadway in neon signs and wept for lost love. This was a stigmata they couldn't understand, but I was grateful for the darkness and the torch songs, away from unfriendly eyes.

In Search of a Miracle

Next morning we left at six-thirty by the only road. Sanoyo was only fifty kilometres away, but the car took nearly four hours. The road was very bad; it was more a mule track than a road, cut by crevices two feet deep sprinkled with boulders. In the rains it is impassable; only aeroplanes can reach Las Casas then—and, of course, the mules from the north; only necessity at the best of times dictated *that* journey. Yet going to Sanoyo by road was really worse. One dropped six thousand feet, circling the same mountain for forty minutes, bumping slowly round

and round on the edge of the precipice, the same scenery on the opposite mountain recurring over and over again, as if one were a needle on a damaged record scraping the same track. A few bright blue birds mocked one with other people's happiness, and the scenery—the great pine forests dropping like curtains—was, I suppose, magnificent, but I was too sick and bruised to care.

It was Easter Sunday, but the only sign of the festival in the little drab village of Sanoyo was at the home of the saint. Some coloured paper streamers hung there, and when we had passed through the yard, a few chickens and pigs stirring the end-of-dry-season dust, we found in the small *sala* a decorated shrine to St. Anthony. The old mother slopped about in ancient gym shoes, tying up her white hair in a pink ribbon, and the chauffeur and I sat down on a bench and stared across at another bench where some villagers were patiently waiting. Out from an inner room—through the door I could see the end of a bed, a cheap woman's magazine, and a paper streamer—came a little party of Indian women, tiny and bowed, old and hideous at twenty. With their cave-dwellers' faces and their long staffs they might have been Stone Age people emerging from forgotten caverns to pay their tribute to the Redeemer on Resurrection morning. One of them wept and wept, and a typewriter clattered with curious modernity in the bedroom. A marimba began to play in the yard among the chickens, and a rocket went off at each corner of the house in turn; it was impressive, a little hypnotic, the tinkly pathetic music rising regularly to the explosion and sinking again; it was

like the preparation for a great event; I felt my incredulity shaken. Suppose there was a miracle, suppose out of some box a voice did speak . . . it was a horrifying thought that life could never be the same again; one couldn't go on living as one had been living. What happens afterwards to the people who are present at a genuine miracle?

But this wasn't a case like that. The music went on too long; I caught sight in the inner room of little conferences; the old woman slopped in and out weaving the pink ribbon in her hair. There was a young man in the bedroom who filled me with distrust—he had a humorous mouth; he looked more educated than the others, like a garage hand or a man in a radio shop. Radio . . . ?

Then after half an hour the son emerged. He wore a pink shirt which wasn't tucked in; his sleeves flapped clerically when he waved his hands; he had evasive eyes. He said the image wasn't there—it had gone to Villahermosa. We just sat on and took no notice. He asked whether I was a doctor—he hadn't liked doctors since the medical officer of health in Tuxtla had come with soldiers to seize the saint. The saint had hidden in the woods and the disappointed soldiers had fired into the house—he showed the bullet marks on either side of the *sala*. I asked if we could see the saint; he flapped his pink sleeves and said he was in Villahermosa. We sat on. He brought out a visitors' book—there were twelve thousand names recorded; he brought out a pile of certificates of cures. There was always the same formula tapped out on his machine, "I, Pedro Lopez, certify that I was out of my mind" (or had fits or

worms in the head or something) "and visited two doctors in my native place who said I was incurable. I came to Sanoyo and saw Señor ——" (I've forgotten the name). "He gave me medicine and now I am quite cured." Then the signature and the witnesses' signatures and a passport photo of a brutal mestizo face—no mention of the saint.

The chauffeur got up and made a long speech. He said we knew the saint was in the bedroom; the señor lacked confidence in us, and yet how fully worthy we were of his trust. I wasn't a doctor, I was a foreigner who had come from England to see the saint. I was a Catholic and *muy religioso*. It didn't seem to do much good; I caught a small child who came out of the bedroom and presented him with a rosary in a little glass box.

Another hour passed; the music had stopped and the fireworks; an old Indian came in to see the statue of St. Anthony and prayed and touched it with lemon leaves and went out. People from the village drifted in and stared at us and looked at the certificates and went out again into the fiery midday sun. A fat woman with a gross spotty face showed us a kind of primitive straitjacket and scars on her wrists—she had been cured of madness. The man in the pink shirt laid in my lap a bottle of maggots which had come out of a man's nose.* The atmosphere was becoming unbearably clinical.

At last after two hours we wore them down. Resistance suddenly crumbled. The saint couldn't talk

* These are planted directly—not through eggs—by a large fly which attacks drunks when they lie helpless on the road. The maggots eventually reach the brain; no cure has been discovered.

because it was Sunday, but we could see him. If we came back on Thursday, then the saint would talk. We went into the bedroom and the son took casually down from a shelf—as if he were handling a grocery and not a miracle—one of those wooden Victorian tea caddies that are divided into two compartments. One compartment was empty; in the other had been glued the fretwork frame of a shrine, and a little picture of St. Michael was pasted at the back—the usual picture of the archangel slaying the dragon. Little balls of coloured silver paper filled the caddy, and among these a nail stuck up, and on the nail rested a little hollow head made, I think, of lead like a toy soldier. It certainly wasn't St. Michael's head—it was a woman's with crimped Grecian hair, an intaglio head. It was this which would give tongue—not on a Sunday, but next Thursday, though I think, if I had been able to revisit the house, Thursday, too, would have proved an unpropitious day. This wasn't the setting for a miracle; there was something astute and amateurish about the whole thing. . . . We put an offering in the box—like the sick people who were not charged a centavo—and said good-bye.

On the way home we stopped for food at an Indian woman's cantina in Istapa and there we heard of a newer San Miguelito, who was also kept in a box, four leagues away by horse; he spoke even on a Sunday—the woman had heard him. So by this time I shouldn't be surprised if there were half a dozen San Miguelitos in Chiapas. The saint is cropping up like boils, and what else can you expect? The Mass is forbidden in the churches; only in the secrecy of a private house can the daily genuine miracle be

performed; but religion will out, and when it is suppressed it breaks its way through in strange and sometimes poisonous forms.

The Last of Chiapas

The long rough journey from Veracruz was over; to-morrow I was leaving for Tuxtla and Mexico City. Already the capital seemed to me a city of infinite luxury; I thought of going to the St. Regis and having a Coca-Cola highball, the brandy cocktails in Mac's bar, the journalists sitting round drinking coffee in the Café de Paris. But perhaps San Miguelito had been offended by my want of faith. Mexico gave me a back kick.

That evening, describing my visit to Herr F., I nearly fainted, and going back to the inn I was caught in a violent storm. The wet clothes finished me: I could eat no supper. In the night I was feverish. The nights had never seemed colder, as I vomited or struggled across the dripping patio to the choked lavatory. Diarrhœa, vomit, fever, was that what they called dysentery? I had been warned to look out for blood, which was the sign of amœbic dysentery, and sometimes I thought I saw it. And all the time I was haunted by the thought of the next day's journey. The journey to Sanoyo had been bad enough, but that had taken only four hours there and four hours back, and I had had a private car. To-morrow it was said to be eight hours on end to Tuxtla in a tiny crowded mail bus. It seemed an impossibility—but I had booked my seat on a plane flying the next day from Tuxtla to Oaxaca, and if I

missed it, God knew how long I'd have to wait for another. And I was scared. I wanted to be where there were doctors. For the past four or five days I had been drinking water—a stupid thing to do in Las Casas.

And when there's no choice one has to go on. Next day the diarrhoea was as bad as ever, the vomiting had stopped, and the fever a little helped—it took the edge off reality. The bus was old and small, with a wooden roof a few inches above our heads and four wooden benches in front of the mail-bags. Every inch was taken. Three of us sat by the driver where there was really room for one. Two stood on the steps and clung to the windshield. We were like an overgrown fossil as we bumped at seven in the morning along the hideously familiar way to Istapa. At a village called San Lorenzo we stopped for breakfast and unloaded a coffin, and I went up into a stony field to unload my sickness and dysentery. Then on again, that interminable winding descent towards the tropics. We had started in the bitter mountain cold and slowly shed our clothes as we went down. A few miles out of Istapa—five and a half hours by this slow decrepit bus from Las Casas—the road to Tuxtla really began in a wilderness of mud-huts and abandoned dredges (everything stopped for the sake of the oil dispute), a good road along which we could scorch at forty miles an hour, dropping down the mountain-side towards the Pacific plain. At the edge of a huge precipice above our road, facing the midday sun, a party of Indians stood in prayer, hands raised above their heads, beside a rusting scoop, but when we had mounted to their level they had gone. It was like

the boundary of a faith—we were leaving behind that wild region of great crooked crosses, of the cave-dweller faces bowed before the crucified Christ, of the talking saint. We were going back and down to the picturesque Mexico of the pistolero and the ruined monastery—through Chiapa de Corzo, all pink wash and palms and tropical fruit and old wounded churches and dusty desolation. This was the tropics and the driver stopped the bus and bought fruit to take back with him to cold Las Casas seven thousand feet above.

Tuxtla is not a place for foreigners—the new ugly capital of Chiapas, without attractions. The railway has not yet reached it, but Serrabia's aeroplanes link it to the rest of Mexico, and there is running water in the hotel and a shower, though the lavatory leaks on the floor and the mosquito-netting stops nearly an inch from the edge of the window, and the door locks won't work and there remain traces of putty along window frames. It is like an unnecessary postscript to Chiapas, which should be all wild mountain and old churches and swallowed ruins and the Indians plodding by or watching from their mud towers the mule tracks from the north. In Tuxtla there are only pistoleros—but most of them were in Las Casas waiting for General Pineda—lottery sellers, and hate of the foreigner, and in the market there were hideous impoverished dolls of wood and painted rag, with wicked dowager home-made faces.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

RETURN TO THE CITY

Mexican Airman

THE dysentery was as bad as ever. I watched anxiously for the blood which would mean hospital and no escape for weeks from this country which I hated. I flew from Tuxtla to Oaxaca in a tiny stuffy Wasp, full of flies which slowly died out against the windows, bumping over the huge brown mountains with a mother and three tiny children and two cocks tied up in straw hats. Sometimes, far below, a church fell into ruin among a few huts in an abandoned plaza, a road snaked for a dozen miles and gave out like a river among rocks.

Serrabia himself was not flying the plane. I was a little disappointed, for I was eager to see a man about whom I had heard so much in Chiapas. He had begun a few years ago on credit with an old machine. The only thing he had owned was the rag he cleaned her with. Now he had a company with a capital of two hundred thousand pesos (say, fifty thousand dollars; it doesn't sound much, but it's a lot for provincial Mexico). One plane flies daily with mail to Mexico City from Tuxtla, on Tuesdays another goes to Oaxaca, and every once in a while a plane visits Las Casas and Yajalon—on old plane which rocks slowly along between, not over, the mountains.

Serrabia himself is a God-made airman. Some

people say that the mysterious plane heard at night and supposed to be a German conspirator from Guatemala is really Serrabia just keeping his hand in with a little night flying for fun—fun over the Chiapas mountains. An American flyer once called on Herr F. at Las Casas. He was shaken by his trip—he said only a madman or a genius could keep a service going over such a state. Every now and then Serrabia opens a new district. Once he was about to fly Herr F. back to Las Casas from Tuxtla when he got the idea of visiting a new village a little out of the way, where the mayor had promised to level a landing-ground. He sent a wire and received a satisfactory reply—the ground was ready. But when they came over the village they could tell the grass had not been cut—impossible to see any obstructions. Nevertheless Serrabia decided to land, cutting a big swathe along the field. The only trouble, he said, was to get up again; he must just taxi back along his tracks. When they were again in the air they began to lurch in a curious way. Herr F. took a look behind and saw the tail was loose and flapping. That didn't put Serrabia out: he landed on a river bank and walked up to a *finca* to find some string. They hadn't any string, but he tied up the tail with fishing-line and said he thought perhaps they'd better make for Villahermosa instead of Las Casas—they had workshops there. So they flew right across Chiapas into Tabasco and landed—it was a long way round for Herr F. On that small landing-field another Mexican plane—two-engined—had just come in from Guatemala, all the way with one engine missing. They have as little fear, these pilots, as mechanical

sense. I was always glad to arrive somewhere—at Salto, Yajalon, Oaxaca.*

Oaxaca

Oaxaca was lovely in its way, but I was too sick and tired to care for any way, even this way of busy little bosky squares. Hideous peasant pottery in the shops; above the cathedral door a lovely group in stone of the Queen of Heaven crowned. It was odd to go into a church again and see the sanctuary light burning and people kneeling before the Host and notices of Mass and Benediction. An oriental flat-roofed town under the leonine wrinkled hills, with what might be the domes of mosques rising a little way above the even level, from the air it has the appearance of a paved square and life going on subterraneanly. I was back where sometimes I had longed to be—on the tourist track; at any moment I expected to see my old friend* from Wisconsin coming round a corner, eager to introduce me to a porter or a waitress who had looked after him. This was a city described in guidebooks where you could hire a taxi and see the sights.

First the cathedral, started in the sixteenth century. The interior seemed curiously small because of the elaborate side-chapels. It was all red velvet and gold: it gave an effect of being padded like some prayer books are. It was a place for prelates, not for prayer. Then the famous Santo Domingo, completed at the end of the seventeenth century. Some people

* Since this was written Serrabia has paid the usual penalty of daring in the air.

say it is one of the finest churches in the world, but somehow it missed me altogether; I preferred its humbler namesake in Las Casas with the Indians crowding in. They are proud there of the genealogical tree—elaborate foliage spreading across the ceiling in high relief, blossoming into crowned figures, among branches of grapes, reaching at last a pale aristocratic face. But it isn't beautiful; it is too low, too oppressive; suppose a crown should fall? One stoops under the weight of the monstrous Spanish dynasty. The exterior is lovely—all the exteriors in Oaxaca are—solid, simple, blocked out, the carving subordinated to the shape, not as in San Luis Potosí crazily rioting and hiding the form of the church. The convent attached to Santo Domingo is lovely too, what is left of it: the broken patio with a classical fountain, ruined in the time of Juárez. the Indian from this state who conquered Maximilian and first began what he hoped was the destruction and what has proved to be the salvation of the Church. Half of it now is cavalry barracks—a soldier asleep in his leggings, on a fallen stone like a cat, the points of a horse painted upon a wall instead of a Madonna, a bugle blowing. But the most human church to my mind in Oaxaca, unweighted with magnificence, is La Soledad; standing on a little terraced plaza, it contains perhaps the second holiest image in Mexico—that of the Virgin of Soledad (the Lonely), who appeared miraculously. She is the patroness of the state of Oaxaca and of all sailors; the size of a large doll, in a crown and elaborate robes, with a flower in her hand, she stands on the altar above the Host. She is Spanish of the

Spanish, a Velazquez Virgin, and the loneliness she solaced, one imagines, was a Spanish loneliness of men heartsick for Castile. She has nothing in common with the wild state behind her, where even that week the Indians of one village staged a minor massacre.

Mitla

I'd had enough; I wanted to get home, not linger in even the most agreeable Mexican town, and Oaxaca was agreeable. The food, for Mexico, was good, but I couldn't eat it; dysentery emptied me; I couldn't remain on my feet for long at a time. I took a car that afternoon to Mitla. It had taken four days on muleback, and complete exhaustion, to see Palenque, if it can be said that I saw it. But it took only six hours' ride on a fairly good road, at a cost of fifteen shillings, to see Mitla, and certainly to the uninstructed these Mixtec ruins are far finer than Palenque's.

One went to them by way of other ruins, the modern ruins of farmsteads. Classical pillars and porticoes were falling back to mud, for they were made of mud just as the houses were, with only a plaster surface. There was no waste and little untidiness; no ugly remains of tile or corrugated iron. Here one was back in cactus land. All the other trees shook refreshingly in the slight afternoon wind, but not these rigid green pipes. Locusts perched on them in the sky-line attitude of horses, the ox-carts trudged by, men winnowed with spades, tossing the yellow seed against the sunset. We stopped at a

cantina, and had some mescal—the driver told me it was good for dysentery. I don't think it was, but it was good for our spirits.

The ruins themselves, under the watchful eye of a colonial church, consist mainly of long narrow courts decorated with patterns of tiles, every pattern slightly varied: a kind of cross-stitch in stone. Huxley has aptly described them as "petrified weaving". On some walls are the remains of fresco work, like illustrations to a hideous Wells romance: all gas-masks, tanks, and guns of a yet uninvented horror, a mechanistic world. With whatever ferocity the Conquistadores fought, the faith they brought with them—the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Virgin of La Soledad—was more human than this. In the underground burial chambers we held candles to faint traces of blood-red paint. A great pillar, the Columna de la Muerte, supports the roof. The guide asks visitors to embrace it, and from the space left between the fingers, he tells how many years of life remain. It seems favourable—or unkind, as you like to put it—to the long-armed: I had seven more years.

Back to Oaxaca, and as I lay in bed I thought how strange was the sound of taxis at night. I hadn't heard them since Veracruz.

Train Journey

Nor had I been in a train since that previous century, coming down to Veracruz by way of Orizaba. The journey from Oaxaca to Puebla is less agreeable and interminably slow. Nevertheless, I was

as happy as dysentery would let me be. Leaving Villahermosa for Palenque, Yajalon for Las Casas, Las Casas for Tuxtla, I had told myself that now at last I was going home, the clock hand was going down, the curve of the globe was turned. But this time, at last, I believed it.

I had nothing to read any more—Cobbett was finished long ago. Nothing to do as the train crawled through the wilderness but jot down notes, the random thoughts of a bored man,

“How one begins to hate these people—the intense slowness of that monolithic black-clothed old woman with the grey straggly hair—removing a tick—blowing her nose—trying to put up a blind or open a lemonade bottle, mooing with her mouth wide, fixing her eyes on people meaninglessly for minutes at a time, slowly revolving her black bulk all of a piece like a mule. And that middle-class child in the black velvet shorts, the striped jersey, and the bright-coloured jockey cap. The hideous inexpressiveness of brown eyes. People never seem to help each other in small ways, removing a parcel from a seat, making room with their legs. They just sit about. If Spain is like this, I can understand the temptation to massacre.

“We have stopped at a dreadful little mining village worse than anything in the Black Country. Mud huts and tin shacks sprawl on top of each other up the same bank, along a tiny polluted stream. One blind beggar makes his way down the train.

“One always hopes for one’s children—somehow—a better life. How dreadful to be, like Fru R., an exile with them here!

"The mother of the odious child in the jockey cap knows all the railwaymen along the line. She holds little receptions at each station and even shakes hands with the driver of a passing train. She reads *El Crimen Sexual* and passes it on—to the old slow woman and her younger sister and the child. She has another child coming—or else worms.

"At — (I have lost my time-table) a whole pack of bitches comes on board, running down the centre of the car picking up the crumbs and bones the passengers have dropped. When they've licked the place clean they leave—with an air of hungry routine. The train goes on.

"The tourist is not encouraged to take this train. There is a quick night service. One begins to understand why.

"The cleanliness and the dirt of these people—always a basin to dip the hands into before a meal and a glass of water to rinse the mouth with after—and then the spittle goes on the floor.

"In Porfirio Díaz's day there may have been atrocities on the haciendas, but one wonders whether their sum of suffering amounted to any more than the bomb in the post at Juárez, the shots in the Opera Cantina, the murders in the papers every day.

"The supporters of the proletarian revolution have staked their lives on a philosophy. It is the only reason they have for going on with the grim job of living. You cannot expect them to admit even to themselves that Russia has proved them wrong—or Mexico—without the comfort of a dramatic conversion to some other faith. Nobody can endure existence without a philosophy.

"Hours before Puebla an awful dusty landscape of whitish grey begins. Flat and uncultivated. Then like an oasis the village of Tehuacán, where the mineral water comes from—Garci Crespo. Bottles of mineral water for sale on the platform before the desert begins again. A consumptive in the car asks to have the window opened. He gestures towards his chest, to explain. He wears a big Mexican hat and a jersey and a scarlet neckerchief—a black Lawrence beard. A little tiny voice comes out—like the noise you get from the whistles in children's crackers. He drinks some water and drops back. There is nothing left of him but the fierce black beard and the big hat. His skin is like paper: his lungs can hardly exist at all.

"The odious child takes all the paper cups from the water-tap by the lavatory and destroys them one by one. Nobody stops him. The white dust from the appalling plain blows against the glass. The heat, with the windows shut, is stifling.

"The plain becomes littered with churches, like pieces of rock. Dusk drops. Darkness, and eccentric domes against the black clouds and the stars."

Puebla

Puebla was the only Mexican town in which it seemed to me possible to live with some happiness. It had more than the usual wounded beauty: it had grace. Something French seemed to linger there from Maximilian's time. You could buy old French glass and portraits of Carlotta on paper-weights; even the arts and crafts of Puebla were civilised in a

Victorian, European way: glass like Bristol glass and delicious little sticks of fruit nougat, toys of straw like the paintings of Tchelichev. And I had not imagined the tiled churches so delicate in colour, for tiles can be hideous even in Puebla where the manufacturers have presented tiled seats in the public gardens which advertise in mauve and green majolica their cigarettes and mineral water. I remember a church picked out in a thin line of daffodil against the sky. The air was clear and smokeless, but not so thin as in Mexico City, and the women were lovely and well dressed. A kind of social Catholicism lingered here—different from the faith of San Luis on the edge of violence, the inanition of Orizaba, the patient carrying-on in the capital, the wild beliefs of Chiapas. I wanted to return here when I was well again, but of course I never did.

The Hidden Convent

What most interested me in Puebla was the secret convent of Santa Monica where the American Rotarian had been told he would see the bones of the nuns' babies. It is a grim bizarre place; if it has beauty, it is a beauty which is caviare to the world. The convent was founded in 1678, but in Juárez's day, when the religious persecution began, it slipped quietly out of the knowledge of the world and was only rediscovered by detectives in 1935. For nearly a century it had existed, novices had been admitted and taken their vows and lived and died, without the authorities ever learning they were there. So small a contact has an enclosed convent with the

world that it was easy to sever all but one thread which attached them to the life of Puebla. That thread was a servant who quarrelled with her mistress in the private house which formed the convent's façade.

You come to it towards the edge of town in a street that has known better days; tall grey houses slip socially downhill towards the tenement. The door stands always open like that of a shady hotel; stone dormitory stairs run up to a little room where decayed men wait for visitors. They have the plump dominating look of politicians on balconies, but they are shabbier—they are not on to quite such a good thing. The whole place is run now by the Freemasons as a kind of anti-God museum. One guide—as seedy and political in appearance as all the rest—consented to take me round at once and not wait for a party; later, going on hands and knees through a trapdoor, we nearly ran into a party head on, and I caught a few phrases, the regulation sneer against holiness. My guide surprisingly did not sneer; he simply related, leading the way first into the little dining-room where the family who occupied this house had their meals. Here it was that the detective broke in three years ago on the evidence of the sacked maid. All she could tell them was that the convent was there; food was bought and went somehow in—but where?—and from the convent there emerged—but how?—embroideries to be sold in return. It was a small house just one room deep in a long street, and this dining-room contained a table and a vase of flowers, a few hard chairs, two shelves in an alcove in place of a sideboard, another vase of flowers upon

the floor beside the wall. The detectives had nearly given the room up, when one of them shifted the flowers and found a bellpush. He touched it and the whole wall behind the shelves swung open, and on the other side steps led straight down into the Mother Superior's study. They found about forty nuns in the convent, middle-aged women: there had been no novices for some years.

"What happened to them?"

"Oh, they were dispersed," my guide said without animosity. "They try to keep up their vocation in private houses."

We climbed down into the little hideous pious study: two glass-fronted bookcases, a table with a dusty cloth, a hard chair, dark pictures of old saints, an admonitory Spanish image, a crucifix. Out of the study the Mother Superior's bedroom—a wooden board to sleep on and over the bed the ugly wounded face of God. It hadn't been easy for the detective even after that entrance; they found the sleeping-quarters easily enough, but where was the chapel? They discovered it eventually: a stone slab was removed from behind the only bath, and they crawled through—as we did now—into a chapel lined with stalls. Hanging above each were a rope and crown of thorns, and a great gilded altar stood at the end. In a glass case enclosed in a reliquary was the founder's withered heart, the colour of long-dried blood. There were more relics in the older chapel behind, where pricks in the wall allowed the nuns to watch at Mass the altar of a neighbouring church. Hearts and tongues had been taken out of their cases and lay about, some in chemical jars of spirits and

others just piled on a plate like pieces of liver—uninteresting bits and scraps of long-dead people. Who, no one knew. Another trapdoor led down into a dark retreat where the nuns could go for contemplation and to the burial place. The bodies were first bricked up and then when the flesh had fallen the bones were thrown into a common pit; now it was exposed, with a few skulls left for propaganda purposes.

We came upstairs again into a room lined with paintings on velvet—terribly idealised paintings of polite Carlo Dolci agonies. The politicians were very proud of these; they could see no beauty in the dark pit, but these, they were worth a million pesos, the guide said to me. I made some silly flippant remark. He wasn't listening. He said absent-mindedly as we came out, "Yes, they have stolen everything from the Church." It astonished me; here indeed was a traitor in the Masonic camp. I told him I was a Catholic, and he said softly and sadly (it came oddly from the seedy political face), "Then you will sympathise with these poor women and the fight they were putting up." He led me out, down a wide flight of colonial stairs, under baskets of fern, into the patio, full of trees and roses—one garden for the novices and a larger one for the nuns. They were full of scent and sunlight and quiet and desertion; a cross stood in the centre of a wall and the shrubs climbed up it like ivy. He picked a rose and gave it me—"to remember those poor women by". The other day I found it again, stuck at random between the pages of *Barchester Towers*, the potpourri scent creeping up from Mr. Arabin's proposal, "'Answer me this,' said Mr. Arabin, stopping suddenly in his walk, and

stepping forward so that he faced his companion. 'Answer me this one question. You do not love Mr. Slope? You do not intend to be his wife?' " It seems a long way from Barchester to Puebla, to the dark burial place and the pit of skulls where the Masonic guides crawl on hands and knees through the bathroom wall into the deserted chapel, a good deal farther than a few thousand miles, all the immeasurable distance between two human minds.

Back Again

It is quicker to go from Puebla to Mexico City by motor-coach than by train, and what I wanted above everything was speed. For just five weeks I had been out of touch with correspondents; so much can happen, and one never has the expectation of good news. Outside the bus office there was a beggar woman whom some hideous disease had bent double: she could only beg your boots for alms. Sweeping round towards fresh pairs of feet she slipped and fell. She lay there with her mouth and nose pressed on the paving, unable to move and unable to breathe until she was lifted.

I was too sick to appreciate the ride up on to the Mexican plateau—a magnificent road along the mountain edge. For the first time since I came to Mexico I could see the great volcano Popocatepetl, a cone of ice bobbing between the woods and peaks, over the decaying churches, like the moon outliving everything. It was beautiful, but I was more concerned with the incompetence of the driver. These

buses go every three hours, every day of the week, from Puebla to Mexico City; and yet before three-quarters of the journey had been done the driver ran out of oil completely. Full of boyishness and amusement, he didn't discover for quite a while what was wrong; it was the biggest joke to him and all the Mexicans, but my nerves could hardly stand it as we sat there by the side of the road waiting for a car with spare oil to pass and the afternoon advanced and I thought how the office where my letters waited closed at six.

In the end we did arrive in time, and I got my letters. As I thought, they weren't so good. A bill from a solicitor's, a lot of newspaper clippings about a lawsuit in London and what Sir Patrick Hastings had said and what the Lord Chief Justice.* It all seemed to me odd, fictitious, and rather silly. I got some medicine and took it and lay down. My room in the dark drab hotel had been moved to another floor, and my luggage was still in the storeroom on the roof and I couldn't find my overcoat. Some proofs of a novel which had been posted to me from New York on April 7 had not arrived, and this was April 21. All the cares and irritations and responsibilities of ordinary life came hurrying back; and I had imagined on that interminable ride to Palenque that once in Mexico City life would become so fine, easy, and luxurious—all brandy cocktails and bourbon and Coca-Cola. Well, I had to see about a boat now to England, but I hadn't enough money to pay the fare until I got my deposit back from the immigration office, and of course the value of the

* A libel suit brought against me by Miss Shirley Temple.

peso since I came over the border had slumped. Money cares crowded in, things which had to be seen to . . . and I had been unhappy in Las Casas because there had been nothing to do.

I lay on my bed beside the telephone and read again what the counsel and judge had said. There was nothing else to read because my books were in the storeroom on the roof. There seemed to be a threat of further proceedings, I don't know why or on what charge. The whole thing was too bizarre to be true. The telephone leered at me like an idiot with its open mouth. One never gets used to the silence of a telephone in a city where one is a stranger. It adds to loneliness. Perhaps I'd ring somebody up, but whom? In Mexico City there is always the difficulty that there are two telephone services. Unless you telephone by the same kind as the other man's you can't get in touch.

In the end I rang up the secretary of the Legation and went and had some drinks and heard the latest news of Cedillo—how he'd been appointed military commandant of Michoacán and pleaded sickness and lay quiet at Las Palomas. No one yet imagined that he was going to be driven to arms. Then I walked back down the Paseo under the phosphorescent lights of the Reforma. The cars hurtled by and the Indian garage hands in dungarees hugged their girls innocently on the stone seats and some kind of procession of women went by with banners (the oil dispute again); the Avenida Juárez, of course, smelt of sweets. The brandy had made me feel better and I tried to eat some dinner.

There was a new waiter since I'd gone away: thin

and dark, with a too confidential smile. He asked me whether I was all alone and I said I was. I thought he wanted to know if I was ready for my dinner or waiting for somebody else. I asked him for a Garci Crespo, to take to my room, and he smiled again confidentially and didn't bring it. I had to ask him several times before I got it, and every time he nodded more winningly, darkly, knowingly—as if I were insisting on the letter of a code. When I was undressing, the glass of the door darkened; somebody scratched, scratched at the pane: it was the waiter. I asked him what he wanted; he merely grinned and said hadn't I asked for a Garci Crespo? I slammed the door shut and a little while later he came padding up the passage and scratched again. I shouted to him to go and turned out the light, but for a long while the small vicious shadow waited, with the patience of a snake, on the other side of the glass.

It was a bad night. On the floor below a hysterical woman screamed and sobbed and a man spoke every way in vain—patiently, roughly, with love and with hate. God knows what relationship was breaking up so publicly in the hotel room. Next day I watched the couples in the lounge and the elevator, the brown impassive sentimental Mexican eyes. Surely some mark would be left on a face by the outrageous night, but none showed. And the waiter came winningly forward to take my order and smiled with forgiveness when I said, "Garci Crespo." Of course the woman screaming and the waiter nibbling outside the door might happen anywhere, but here, in this city, on the night of what I'd thought would be so happy a return, they seemed

more than usually in the picture—of a country of disappointment and despair.

Old Threads

It was like beginning things all over again. I had forgotten in Chiapas the hatefulness of Mexico City: the shops full of junk—bad serapes and bad china and hideous elaborate silver filigree—the taxis tooting all the time. What had exhausted me in Chiapas was simply physical exertion, unfriendliness, boredom; life among the dark groves of leaning crosses was at any rate concerned with eternal values.

I picked up threads—the dentist first—I couldn't avoid him in the Francisco Madero. He hadn't seen his girl again. He seemed more than ever an awful bore. He couldn't forget that his family had once been rich landowners in Yucatán. He insisted on taking me here and there to see his wife, his mother, an uncle. We walked upstairs and downstairs; he ordered taxis imperiously at my expense. An introduction, and then down the stairs again and another taxi. "I want you to meet my cousin."

There were notices stuck up in the streets about an election in Jalisco. "Four Reasons why we do not support the candidature of Silvano Barbo Gonzalez. Silvano Barbo Gonzalez is a fool, an adventurer, an ingrate, a double traitor. He is a fool because . . . an adventurer because . . ."

I hung around the post office waiting for my proofs. I had traced them at last, they were there; but I couldn't have them for another three days. To get a parcel it is first necessary to receive an official

notification, which has to be presented between certain hours at a particular window—there is always a queue. Then you are given another paper to sign. This paper has to be carried to another window where you pay an arbitrary charge, said to be calculated by the weight. Then to another window. At a fourth window, I think (memory begins to fail), you receive your parcel. As there is a queue at each window it is impossible to go through the whole routine before the closing hour. You come back and carry on where you left off last time. . . .

Arts and Crafts

The medicine did me good. It reduced the dysentery to manageable proportions. Conscience told me that I hadn't visited any of the right places. I took a bus therefore to Taxco, four hours away beyond Cuernavaca.

Taxco is the showplace of the Mexican tourist belt—old Mexico carefully preserved by a society of business men and American artists known as "The Friends of Taxco". It is the Greenwich Village of Mexico (Mr. Spratling makes his silver jewellery there), with a touch of Capri about it, and it is adequately described by Miss Frances Toor in her invaluable guide to the tourist belt, "Taxco. (Azt. 'Ball Game'): A mining town, founded by Borda. Pop., 3500. Alt., 5000. Beautiful and picturesque. Colonial and European in aspect. Even and agreeable climate, crisp nights. Good swimming."

Taxco, I suppose, would be charming enough, as it clammers up all sides of a steep hill towards a little

bosky plaza and a grotesque and lovely church, all crusted ornament and contorted gold, if it had not become an American colony—a colony for escapists with their twisted sexuality and their hopeless freedom. The place has rotted—the soldiers lie about in the streets at night with their women like dogs. All the shops are full of arts and crafts. Directly you get off the bus the children swarm around with a few words of English. “Shave, sir?” “Hotel, sir?” “This is Guadalupe Street, sir.” Nearly all the hotels—from the great luxury barrack on the hilltop downwards—are American managed. The local school-master sat in the plaza having his shoes shined; young and plump and immature with glossy hair, he tried to take on himself the part the priest would have performed in the old days. He was benevolent and patronising, he knew everybody, but unlike the priest, he knew nothing. He sat there like a poster advertising something of no value to anyone at all.

Cuernavaca has at any rate what Taxco has not—the interest of history—though not much else except some good hotels, the country homes of diplomats, what was once Cortés’s palace (given over to politicians and the sentimental frescoes of Rivera), and little obscene bone figures of men with movable phalli sold secretly by small boys near the bus stop. It is the capital of Morelos, once one of the richest states of Mexico, which was left barren by Zapata’s useless rising. A week-end resort for Mexico City, it lies two thousand feet and more below the ridge that separates Morelos from the Mexican plateau, and no one who has read Miss Rosa King’s account of her experiences in the Zapata rising can

climb that long winding hill, between the scrub and thorn trees, to the plateau without remembering the refugees who swarmed up there—women and children crushed together in panic-stricken flight, trampling each other down hour after hour while Zapata's men picked off the rear. That was not much more than twenty years ago; now public taxis will take you from Cuernavaca to the capital—about sixty miles—for two shillings. But history in Mexico has to be very ancient before you feel safe from its influence—any day the new motor-road may hear the shots again, and indeed all the way along from Taxco to Mexico you come on the little military stations which keep the road safe for tourists, or nearly safe. A friend of mine—with her father, an American Senator—was held up by bandits near Taxco only eighteen months ago. The day I passed the poor huts of the soldiers—just twig and mud, like birds' nests, on the bank—were decorated with faded bunting for Soldiers' Day, when the President was to pay special honour to his army, with an eye to Cedillo up in San Luis. The capital was everywhere decorated with posters in honour of the heroic defenders of the Republic, and here along the millionaire's motor-road the heroes looked out of their wretched huts, under the cheap bunting, their overcoats turned up to the ears against the icy evening air.

At the top of the ridge above the Mexican plain one emerged far above the sunset, which poured out between the mountains—a pale green under-water light shading into gold across the Mexican plain towards the volcanic snows, over more churches than

you could count of faint pink stone, over haciendas like broken toys, and the wrinkled hills, a hundred luminous miles. On a hilltop a gigantic razor blade, advertising somebody's perfect shave, caught the last light.

All Quiet

Father Q. came to see me and rang up the Bishop of Tulancingo. Over the telephone he called him Señor—"Si, Señor, no, Señor." Then we set out together to call on him. He was a different type of man from the Bishop of Chiapas; dark, stout, and young, he reminded me a little of an Italian diplomat. His surroundings seemed more practical and less pious than the old exile's. He wore black lay clothes—only his ring betrayed his rank—and he had an agreeable air of authority and humour. He was like a general in the field, and his field was not his diocese but the whole area of persecution. It was he who, with six girls, had started the training-college I have mentioned, in the days of the worst persecution. At the time when Pro was shot he was in prison himself. But Pro was not a solitary victim—he counted over others he had known as we went for a drive together out to Chapultepec, sitting square, talking with immense satisfaction of death. "The Church needed blood," he said. "It always needs blood." It was the duty of priests and bishops to die; he had no sympathy for complaint and pious horror. . . . "You see the man who is driving us?" he said. "He is the brother of María de la Luz Camacho, the girl they killed at Coyoacán" (the suburb where

Trotsky lived with Rivera in the floodlit villa).

A life—in the worst tradition of uncritical piety—has been written of María de la Luz.* Out of its fervid pages a kind of pathos emerges, the pathos of pious tea parties, study circles, leagues of this and that, matched against the ruthless Garrido. I had seen the results of Garrido's work in Tabasco. Here, when he was Minister of Agriculture, he had organised an attack at the end of 1934 on the Coyoacán church during Mass. Revolvers were distributed to the Red Shirts at the town hall; María Camacho heard of the danger, went to the church—dressed in her best clothes—and waited in the doorway for the attack. Her courage gave others courage, and when the attack came she was the first to fall. Father Dragon with exemplary piety digs up the records of tea parties, amateur dramatics; the fact remains that in Mexico the Catholic societies which we regard in England with such suspicion, with their ribbons and medals and little meetings after Benediction, have been lent the dignity of death.

The Bishop, leaning back in the smooth efficient car driven by the brother of a martyr, said, "I wish you could have met the Bishop of Veracruz. *There is a man. . .*" In the modern city—among the American teashops, the advertisements for safety razors, the dapper night clubs—there existed, besides medieval violence, this medieval sanctity. The electric-light signs flashed on and off; the Bishop spoke of the other bishop who was dying now in the hospital—his mission in Havana, the most hopeless

* *María de la Luz: Protomartyr of Catholic Action*, by Anthony Dragon, S. J.

place in all the Catholic world for missions, where hardened racketeers of the brothel and dance-hall and cocktail lounge wept; how he lay anonymously in bed in a Colombian hospital, crippled with sciatica, next to a dying man who needed a priest—"I am a priest": his charity. Every week in Mexico City, after he had been expelled from his diocese, he would spend four hundred pesos on food for the poor. He would load the food in a basket and wait until he saw an old decrepit taxi, the kind of taxi which would find it hard to get a fare. Then he would haggle sharply with the driver, driving a hard bargain, and afterwards would ask if he were married and how many children he had and at the end of the drive would give him a peso above the bargain for his wife and one for each child. He would drive into the poorest streets of the city and, choosing what seemed the most hopeless house, he would tell the driver to take the basket. "Go up to the door and when the woman comes tell her God has sent this. . . ."

Good-bye

Next night I went with Father Q. to a small private celebration of Archbishop Ruiz y Flores's jubilee—the apostolic delegate who had been expelled from Mexico by Calles, and who was now Archbishop of Morelia. He sat there in the front row of the little hall in the German Club on an uncomfortable drawing-room chair, a small old man with a Pickwickian face, if one can imagine Pickwick a little embittered by the world's violence and injustice—he

had seen the worst days of all. Father Q. led me up and introduced me. We talked for a little while of Tabasco and Chiapas; he made some infinitely polite remark about England; men in dark suits who might or might not have been priests stood around with courteous patience. The old man, I remembered, had fought with Calles, bargained, seen his treaties broken, gone patiently on. One was looking at history. I went back to Father Q. and my little gilt chair.

It was a very polite gathering, stiff and middle-class and elderly on the hard chairs, there to listen to a programme of music and poetry; it was the end of Mexico for me, my bags packed and my ticket taken. Outside the drums were beating on the eve of Soldiers' Day—the sound of bugles mingled with the gentle decorous professorial music of Debussy. It was like a dream; almost everyone I had met was in this small room. There was the historian Dr. C., who had taken me to see the Bishop of Chiapas—oh, years ago. There was the Bishop himself in the front row. And there was the priest from San Luis with the broad gentle face, the air of learning borne quietly for the sake of the humble and the workers. And there was the old aristocratic sceptic I had prayed beside at Guadalupe; but when she turned her head I saw it was another, turned out of the same mould of education and lost possessions and patience. I looked around, half expecting everybody to be here—the dentist with his girl from the Waikiki, the Socialist school teacher from Yajalon, the Norwegian widow with her paralysed mouth and her heavy anxieties, my muleteer, badgered and hysterical, praying to the

Mother of God, the American dentist losing the thread of every conversation, spitting, and hopeless and thinking of the States, the priest in the tweed cap and motoring-coat and the mauve patch of skin, the old German teacher rattling his umbrella and saying, "Life is motion", the blind youth Tomas.

"Look, look," Father Q. said excitedly, "he's wearing a Roman collar." A priest was taking his conductor's baton and arranging the choir—ugly, pious, rather spotty girls most of them, dressed decorously to hide the arms and necks. One didn't wear a Roman collar in Mexico—it entailed a fine of five hundred pesos for the first offence. The bugles and the drums went on outside . . . marching feet . . . the heroic defenders of the Republic preparing to descend on San Luis and Las Palomas. Where was the man who had passed out by the blue soda-water siphon? And the man who had ridden up in the dark as the storm broke near Palenque—"con amistad"? And the old hotel-keeper who had regretted the days of Díaz? Then Debussy started, *assez vif et bien rythmé*, and then somebody made a speech—full of tortuous Spanish compliments to the little old man in the front row. People applauded—politely. Of course those others were not there—they were out in the violent world outside; this was headquarters, where they made blueprints—interminably—for a peaceful and holy world.

The "*Regina Cæli*" of Lotti, and then a "discurso" by a Jesuit—he, too, on this day of jubilee wore his Roman collar. Fifty years in the priesthood . . . more Debussy, *très modéré* . . . Señor Alfonso Junco, a leading Catholic poet, read a poem—unrhymed,

statuesque, chilly . . . *Ave Maria* . . . it was growing late and rather cold . . . another "discurso" by a well-known and popular lawyer, full of jokes I couldn't understand. I watched the backs of the bishops—Tulancingo, Chiapas, Mexico, Morelia—and thought of the grave of crosses above Las Casas as the sun went down. It should have been the end of the programme, but another poet—a big, bouncing man in an ill-fitting evening suit and with black curly hair—came on to the platform. He had written something specially for the occasion called "Night in Michoacán". He bellowed it out—great rhymed Lepanto stanzas full of fury and drama and sentiment—and the bishops sat on. A last piece of music and the celebration was over. I said good-bye to the historian and Father Q. and the priest from San Luis: Mexico, too, was over. The bishops made their way down the stairs in herds; priests turned up the collars of their coats to hide the Roman collars; people genuflected awkwardly on the stairs to the old Archbishop, who had worked the miracle of the Eucharist now for fifty years. He came gently down, bitter, kindly, Pickwickian: the dangerous man. They had put him on an aeroplane with detectives in 1932—he was allowed to take nothing but his breviary—and dumped him across the border.

"Here had been, mark, the general-in-chief,
Thro' a whole campaign of the world's life and
death,
Doing the King's work all the dim day long,
In his old coat and up to his knees in mud. . . ."

EPILOGUE

I

The Blind Eye

THE way back to Veracruz by the same train: everything repeated. Even the boy singers came on at the same station and sang the same songs and lurched on afterwards towards the same Pullman. The same food and the same tourist trophies at the stations. Only this time the volcanoes were there, moving half submerged like icebergs along the horizon, and this time I didn't get out at Orizaba. Nothing was quite so effective a second time; even the gardenias were a little tarnished.

Next morning the rain came pouring down—the weather was breaking up. There seemed no means of dealing with the rain—the streets flooded immediately. There was no way of getting across from one pavement to another. How does life go on in the rainy season? There was nothing to do but go aboard the German liner in which I had booked a third-class passage, hang over the rail and watch the loading, and wait for the night. The last contact with Mexico was a bribe to the customs man of five pesos to leave my bags unopened—duty is paid on going out of Mexico as well as on going in. There seemed to be a lot of Spaniards on board—one could tell it from the accent—but the stewards carefully segregated them for meals, one service for Latins and one

for Nordics. Among the Latins were included a few hawk-like Syrian women on the way to Palestine.

The shadow of the Spanish war stretched across the South Atlantic and the Gulf; it cropped up in Las Casas of an evening round the radio—one couldn't expect to escape it in a German ship calling at Lisbon.

My cabin held six, but at first there were only five of us: an old man who never spoke a word, a fat Mexican who spat all night upon the floor and said, "*No puede dormir*", because *he* couldn't sleep, and a young Spaniard with a hard handsome idealist's face, and his small son whom he disciplined like a drill-sergeant. There was no doubt at all where he was going, and, when I returned to my cabin just before we sailed I found a stranger wearing a beret and an old suit which didn't look natural: you felt he was used to a better cut. There were others in the cabin, too; they blocked the door after I got in; they wore their berets like a uniform and each had a little gold chain round his neck with a holy medal dangling under the shirt. At first I couldn't understand their Castilian—they seemed perturbed, they wanted to know who I was. The word "*inglés*" didn't reassure them, but when I said "*Católico*" and showed *my* lucky charm they looked a little easier. The stranger was a stowaway, he was going to "pay the Reds"; I must promise to tell no one, they said, blocking the door, till we had left Havana. As we sailed out of Veracruz that night we passed a Spanish ship which had been impounded since the war started and the third class emptied on to the deck and gave the dark and silent boat a noisy farewell, "*Arriba España*."

Viva Franco." The stewards smiled gently, bringing round the salad, hearing nothing.

After Havana the volunteers began to disclose themselves, more than two dozen of them. Many of them had their wives and children with them; they wore their uniforms quite openly when we were once at sea, black forage caps and Sam Browne belts, blue shirts with the Falangist fasces embroidered on the pocket. They were very noisy and carefree, without bravado; you felt that going to war was one of the natural functions of man. There was something agreeably amateur, too, about their Fascism. I think the Germans looked a little askance when the arms went up in salute for nothing at all, for a silly old man, for a joke. "*Arriba Españas*" and "*Viva Francos*" burst boisterously out for no reason on the hot unshaded deck, with a hint of mockery. Killing the Reds, that was a man's occupation; but all this dressing up to do it, that was a joke, a game. They enjoyed it, but not in the serious German way. Oh, the consultations on deck, the handing out of envelopes, the open conspiracies. There was one printed form which aroused my curiosity: instructions from Burgos? I learned what it was when Sunday came.

The blind non-intervention eye was very blind indeed, and the German ear was very deaf. On Sunday there was a Church parade; the volunteers marched up to Mass in the first class; twenty-five of them lined the wall in uniform; one man stood at attention on each side of the altar; it was impressive, as a funeral is. A monk preached (I had seen him playing chess, cheery and unshaven in an old striped shirt and no tie). He preached on suffering and

sacrifice and offering up your agony to God. After the Mass was over, before the priest had time to leave the altar, the volunteers broke into the Falangist hymn—that was what they had been learning all the week from the printed forms. And then, inevitably, the Fascist salute, "*Arriba España. Viva Franco*"; every arm went up but mine, yet no one minded at all. These were Spaniards, not Germans.

It was odd comparing them with their German allies—the young German farmer, for instance, from Chiapas, who joined heartily in the right cries and hated Christianity. I tried to involve him in argument in front of the volunteers. "This," I wanted to indicate, "is your ally." They stood listening with mild astonishment, the holy medals dangling round their necks, while he plunged bull-like at Christianity.

"But you must admit that—so far—nationalism hasn't produced any art, literature, philosophy, to compare with the Christian."

"I see you do not know the works of Ludendorff. Listen to me. The Christians have only won because they have killed all not Christian. Once we had nothing to give people, only Religion. Now we give the Nation. But we are not atheists like the Reds. We have a God, one God."

"The old Jewish Jehovah?"

"No, no. A Force. We do not pretend to know what he is. A Principle."

The volunteers listened politely to the new Germany, but one of the cooks jumped overboard; he hadn't been home for ten years; perhaps he couldn't stand the prospect.

For more than four hours we sailed in circles looking for him; men were posted inconspicuously about the deck; everybody was seasick. A note of irritation became evident among the Nordics—a kind of faint peevish hatred of the man who had inconvenienced them. As for the Latins, they didn't care at all. Then the ship straightened out and went on. With terrible quickness the drowned desperate man was forgotten—people got their appetites back in time for dinner.

Atlantic

There is something dauntingly world-wide about a ship, when it is free from territorial waters. Every nation has its own private violence, and after a while one can feel at home and sheltered between almost any borders—you grow accustomed to anything. But on a ship the borders drop, the nations mingle—Spanish violence, German stupidity, Anglo-Saxon absurdity—the whole world is exhibited in a kind of crazy montage.

The world—the Syrian woman, for instance. She never washed; her clothes hid dismal secrets of uncleanliness; her sallow beaky face, with grey dusty hair and one false eye, never concealed an envy and hate for all the Western world. When her own meal was finished she would prowl back and forth behind our table watching every mouthful. She stole spoons and there would be sudden hideous scenes between her and the German stewardess, flaring up by the sideboard. She directed her special hatred at a middle-aged American woman, who should have

been travelling tourist; on one occasion she came sidling up and spat into the American's open bag, while all her friends laughed.

The German ex-officer: when sober he was charming, small and fair with a secretive rat-like charm. He had been shot in the stomach during the war and now he drank and drank and drank. By night he would become speechless and immobile. In the early hours of the morning he could be seen sitting alone in the dining-room with his head hanging down and a cigarette guttering out between his fingers—like a doll from which the sawdust has run.

The Escapist

Then there was Kruger, a pale big man with clothes loose as though he'd shrunk, who came on board between detectives. He had been in a Mexican prison down at Tapechula in Chiapas, near the Guatemalan border; he had never expected to come out alive and now in his quiet gentle way, playing with the children, urging me not to have another drink, he showed an amazed gratitude for life. He had been looking after a *finca* for a Swede and one day he thought he'd go into town. He took a stroll round the little hot Pacific town, listened to the marimbas, sat down in the plaza. Two plain-clothes men came up and put revolvers to his head. In Tapechula they couldn't bear strangers. He had no papers, so they put him in jail and told him he'd never get out without them. For eight days in the tropical heat he had no food or water; the floor crawled with worms and other things; no exercise

but walking up and down the common cell. The other prisoners tried to start a fight—even in prison you are a gringo, but he knocked a man down and that stopped that. He showed me his big mild bandaged hand; he'd broken it. A man who was in for drunkenness said he'd take a letter for Kruger to the German consul, and the consul brought him money for food, but said he could do nothing, because he had no papers. For three months Kruger stayed there in semi-starvation. Most of the people with him were murderers—one man who wasn't exactly a murderer (he had paid someone else to do the murder) suggested to Kruger that he write to the Mexican Government. He smuggled the letter out and the Government sent an agent down to Tapechula and fetched him away to Veracruz. There they kept him another two months in prison—it wasn't much better than Tapechula—and then shipped him on board the German liner for Hamburg. "And why hadn't you any papers?"

"Oh," he said, "they were stolen from me in a hotel. Up by the American border. In Juárez. A bad town. Nothing but murder all the time."

He leaned interminably over the rail just staring at the sea, being alive, smiling. Juárez was only one stage of a bizarre journey over a quarter of a century; he was what we call now an escapist. It came out in scraps during the fortnight's voyage, in no chronological order, like a Conrad novel, but when you put them together the scraps fitted. An extraordinary sense of goodness surrounded him, this man who had come from one prison and was probably going to another, for he had once deserted from a

German ship and he never for a moment disguised his opinion of National Socialism. "I am not afraid of anything," he would say gently when you remonstrated—without boasting, just a fact like his broken hand. Even the German ship's officers recognised this quality of goodness, and extended to him the privileges which were allotted only to a chosen few of the third class. And always his random conversation would come back to one ambition—to be settled on the Amazon. He had once spent six months there, far up over the Peruvian border, on a tributary; and he was going back. Nobody could stop him. He'd stow away in one ship, jump another. When he spoke of it he was like a lover, and like a lover he brought the beloved name into every conversation. We would be talking of Hitler or of his other great theme, that money wasn't important, or of books or women, and then an added gentleness would come into his voice and he'd say, "The Indians, they eat spiders. A great delicacy," and you knew he was away in a land where a man could live on nothing, without violence or hate, where what you planted always grew and the water was good to drink and the climate was kind—except to fat men—and there was nothing to worry about any more for ever. Of course if you wanted gold, he said with pity, you could get it—from the natives in return for dynamite and cartridges. There were lots of old mines the Indians knew. He never bothered himself, though once he had got a small bottleful worth sixty marks, but it had soon gone in a hotel which charged seven marks a day. How good the natives were, he said with love; not like the Mexicans. (If he

ever saw a Mexican again he'd kill him.) They ran away at first, but when they saw you meant no harm, they soon came creeping back. . . . Paraguay was good too, good people; a man could have ten wives if he wanted wives. As for himself, he could go ten years without a woman . . . all he needed to be happy was to be back there, on the Amazon. . . .

Leaning over the rail, looking at Havana with disapproval—nothing but drink and women—he said, “You come with me to the Amazon.” I said I would for a few months. “Oh, no,” he said, “you will never want to go home—never. You can buy a house for fifty marks. Why, in Iquitos, the city, the Salvation Army bought a whole block in the square, with a cinema, for two thousand marks.” I said I had a wife and children. “Never mind,” he said; “you will never want to go home, never. You can get another wife there.”

He left Germany in 1913, when he was nineteen, because he believed there was going to be a war. He was a sailor and they said to him, “This is your last voyage. Next time you do naval service.” So he left his ship in New York and got a job as a fireman in an ice factory. Then he helped with row-boats on the Hudson, but his employer wanted him to marry, so he left that job and joined a circus. His job, because he'd been a sailor, was to test “the big top”. Another time he was sent down to Alabama to work on a construction gang. After the war he shipped on a rotten old British freighter with bad boilers at Norfolk. The crew had all deserted, so they took men off the streets—twenty-five pounds a head to go to Liverpool. It took them fourteen days. At Liver-

pool the immigration officer repatriated the men, took away Kruger's employment papers, and sent him back to Germany. Then he got a boat, to the East, but the captain was an ex-naval officer and treated his men like dirt. Kruger lost his temper and threatened to kill the captain with a shovel; the captain called the chief, and he threatened to kill the chief too. So they said, "You wait. We fix you when you get back." At Alexandria they wouldn't give him any money for shore leave until he threatened to desert, and the same happened at Barcelona. At Barcelona he met a German baker. They went and bought a big cask of wine (he drank in those days); after a while they fell asleep beside the cask and when he woke the boat was gone and he had spent all his money. So he went to the German consul, who said, "I know all about you, Kruger. You're a mutineer and a deserter. I will not give you a cent." Kruger said, "O.K.," and enlisted in the Foreign Legion. He served two years—there wasn't a chance of getting away. After that he could choose any town in Spain in which to live and he chose Vigo, he didn't know why. An obscure episode fitted in there, I think, with a German painter who had two wives in different parts of the town. He wanted Kruger to marry too, but instead he got a boat to Lima and so he reached the Amazon. He had a Swedish employer there. "His first wife," he said with a gentle laugh at the quaintness of life, "she was eaten by the Indians." And so we made a date for Iquitos two years hence—he thought it might take him that long to get back to Paradise. He came gently up behind my chair on the windy third-class deck—the Azores were going

by in a thin mist of rain, steep cliffs, a waterfall, the great white church of Flores, and the surf beating up—and he said, “You worry too much. You don’t want to worry. You just want to contemplate.”

“What?” I said. “My navel?”

“No, no,” he said. “Just think of nothing. Be calm.”

“Perhaps it’s easy on the Amazon.”

“That’s right,” he said, “you don’t need to bring anything with you. Perhaps a little dynamite. Just a pair of trousers and two shirts and a sunhat. A mosquito-net and a canoe perhaps—but you can get that cheap in Iquitos. You ask for me there. They’ll tell you where I am.”

He thought perhaps he’d jump the ship at Lisbon, but they didn’t give him a chance. He was carried remorselessly on towards Hamburg and prison. People were kind to him as they are kind to you before an operation, but playing all the afternoons with the children, he wasn’t frightened. It was only one more thing to escape from, for escapists get accustomed to prison, hunger, sickness. Sometimes one wonders what it is they do—with so much hardship—escape.

Etcetera

It wasn’t a very lucky ship. The day before the cook jumped overboard, an engine broke down and we had to go at half-speed most of the day; and then a woman in the first-class fell asleep with a lighted cigarette in her hand and set fire to her bed and herself. It was very hot and then it was very cold, as if

we were living through the seasons. Mexico went backwards at twenty knots over the edge of the world. Somewhere, I suppose, the *Ruiz Cano* rolled from Veracruz to Villahermosa and back and the sailors stood about doing up their trousers; the dentist was back at El Frontera; and the Norwegian lady waited with hopeless optimism for her son's return. It is awful how things go on when you are not there.

The day before Lisbon silence came down on the third class. There were no "*Arriba Españas*" all the afternoon. The stern father walked up and down, up and down, his child hanging to his arm, up and down, drowned, you could tell, in a sea of unreality: here, for ten days, he had been on a pleasure cruise, there the train for Salamanca left at nine. There was a farewell dinner, perhaps the last good meal before the trenches; "*Auf Wiedersehen*" was printed inside a little scarlet heart on the menus, and there was a speech about "our great ally" and Austria which had just been annexed—and sacrifice. It wasn't only the Germans who had been turning blind eyes all these days; but the blind eyes of the Spanish volunteers were now beginning to open, like those of new-born children opening on the lunar landscape of the human struggle.

2

A State of Mind

THE A.R.P. posters were new, as one jolted through the hideous iron tunnel at Vauxhall Bridge, under

the Nine Elms depot and the sky-sign for Meux's beer. There is always a smell of gas at the traffic junction where the road is up and the trams wait; a Watney's poster, a crime of violence, Captain Coe's Finals. How could a world like this end in anything but war? I wondered why I had disliked Mexico so much: *this* was home. One always expects something different.

“Through winter-time we call on spring,
And through the spring on summer call,
And when abounding hedges ring
Declare that winter's best of all;
And after that there's nothing good
Because the spring-time has not come—
Nor know that what disturbs our blood
Is but its longing for the tomb.”

In the grit of the London afternoon, among the trams, in the long waste of the Clapham Road—a Baptist chapel, Victorian houses falling into decay in their little burial grounds of stone and weed, a coal merchant's window with some fuel arranged in an iron basket, a gas showroom, and a grammar school for girls—I tried to remember my hatred. But a bad time over is always tinged with regret. I could even look back on the dark croquet lawn under the red-brick skyscraper of classrooms with regret; it is as if everywhere one loses something one had hoped to keep. The young girl and the Socialist teacher lay on their bunks in the rocking cell of the *Ruiz Cano* and hummed to each other tunes out of a cheap magazine. Why—on the Gulf—had that seemed bad and this good? I couldn't remember.

Mass in Chelsea seemed curiously fictitious; no peon knelt with his arms out in the attitude of the cross, no woman dragged herself up the aisle on her knees. It would have seemed shocking, like the Agony itself. We do not mortify ourselves. Perhaps we are in need of violence.

Violence came nearer—Mexico is a state of mind. One sat in the hideous little convent gymnasium while the rain fell and the bells outside sounded for evensong and a man explained how our children were to be evacuated. An aeroplane flew low overhead and the tradesmen sat in their drab Sunday best and listened, and a woman cried melodramatically. The Mother Superior—with a bone-white face and a twitching upper lip—made notes in pencil. The telephones were cut off, the anti-aircraft guns were set up on the common outside, and the trenches were dug. And then nothing happened at all—the great chance of death was delayed. The motor-cars came cruising back along the Spaniards Road and through Hyde Park; poverty and lust called to each other as usual in the wintertime early dark.

And in Chiapas the white churches fell to ruin staring up at Serrabia's planes flying overhead—like faces the world has corrupted waiting through the dry months and the rains for the footstep, the voice, "Is it easier to say your sins be forgiven you . . . ?"

40. R. J. WHITE *Waterloo to Peterloo*
41. LEWIS MUMFORD *The Condition of Man*
42. HENRY JAMES *English Hours*
43. S. M. LIPSET *Political Man*
44. MILTON SHULMAN *Defeat in the West*
45. GRAHAM GREENE *The Travel Books of Graham Greene*
46. ANTHONY POWELL *John Aubrey and His Friends*
47. MARGARET COLE *Fabian Socialism*
48. R. A. SCOTT JAMES *The Making of Literature*

**THE TRAVEL
OF HERMAN GREENE
JOURNEY WITHOUT MAPS
THE LAWLESS ROADS**

These two travel books have a distinguished place among Herman Greene's works

"*Journey Without Maps* is not only a well-written narrative of travel and adventure, but that rare thing, a travel book which is also a work of art." Thus wrote the *Daily Freeman* reviewer in 1938 of Greene's remarkable account of his journey through Liberia.

The Lawless Roads, which was first published in 1939, resulted, as did his novel *The Flower and The Glory*, from the author's visit to pre-colonial Mexico. As a Catholic he went to see how the people of his faith fared under such conditions. "What he has done," said the *Daily Freeman* reviewer, "is to write a magnificent beautiful travel book . . . it is a book of a great kind and as such it will remain worth reading."